

SIX GREAT ACTORS

GARRICK

MACREADY

KEAN

IRVING

KEMBLE

FORBES-ROBERTSON

'THE most elusive, intangible and controversial kind of greatness,' says Richard Findlater, 'is greatness in acting. If we could capture and explain that miracle, we could explain what is the greatness that the theatre alone can give to us. That is why I found the challenge of choosing and describing six great actors so irresistible and so exciting.' He has chosen David Garrick, John Philip Kemble, Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready, Sir Henry Irving and Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, and in telling the story of their life and work in six brief, critical essays he also provides a colourful panorama of English theatre history from 1740 to 1914.

Mr. Findlater, the author of *The Unholy Trade*, *Grimaldi* and *Michael Redgrave: Actor*, does not claim to have solved the age-old enigma—'What is a great actor?'—but his book gives a clear picture of six kinds of greatness, and is likely to start people talking not about the theatre's past but about its future.

Six Great Actors is not intended for specialists, but for everybody—young and old—who is fascinated by the magic glamour of the stage.

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SIX GREAT ACTORS

DAVID GARRICK . JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE

EDMUND KEAN . W. C. MACREADY

SIR HENRY IRVING . SIR JOHNSTON FORBES-ROBERTSON

BY
RICHARD FINDLATER



HAMISH HAMILTON
LONDON

*First published in Great Britain 1957
by Hamish Hamilton Ltd
90 Great Russell Street London W.C.1.*

For
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*Durga Sah Municipal Library,
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Glass No. . 927

Book No. . F 37 SA

Received on April 62

7237

*Made and Printed in Great Britain by C. Tinkling & Co., Ltd.,
Liverpool, London and Prescot.*

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*The prints for all the illustrations were kindly lent by the
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FOREWORD

IN an age of inflation, when 'great' players are discovered every year, let me begin by defining my scale of measurement. There are, at most, six English players alive who qualify as candidates for the crown; and in the whole history of the British stage no more than a dozen are safely throned. Here are six, viewed—for the most part—by eye-witnesses. They would have filled a book three times as long as this brief survey, from which many people, many points, many performances have had regretfully to be erased. Space is too limited, indeed, to give an index, a bibliography and detailed sources; although this book could never have been written without the help of several admirable biographies, listed in a final note. Greatness in acting is the most elusive, intangible and controversial kind of greatness, yet if the enigma could be explained we should have a better understanding of the mystery of the theatre itself. Here, I hope, is a book of clues.

For their assistance and advice, I am most grateful to Mr. Laurence Irving, Mr. George Speaight, Mr. Raymond Mander and Mr. Joe Mitchenson.

I

DAVID GARRICK

IN the flickering candlelight of a small, half-empty theatre in the East End of London, watched by a restless audience of periwigged first-nighters, a short, dark and alert young man—wearing a temporary hump upon his shoulder—stepped out from the wings into history. Pulling his plum-coloured velvet robe about him, he limped across the strip of green carpet which was always laid down for the performance of tragedies, and took up his stand in the front of the stage. Fixing his bright and piercing eyes upon the seven backless benches in the pit, whose occupants still laughed and chattered, he launched into his opening speech of *Richard III.*

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York. . . .

Soon the usual playhouse noise was hushed; the Monday night chill wore off; for this unknown and anonymous young man was doing something which had never been seen before on the stage of Goodman's Fields or any other theatre in the year of grace 1741: he was acting a character in a play as if he were a living person talking from experience.

The rebel player, like the original author, was not named upon the bills, where he was described as 'A Gentleman (Who never appeared on any Stage.)' Although

this was not strictly accurate, for he had already acted at Ipswich that summer under a pseudonym and had made one secret appearance on this very stage in the mask and costume of a harlequin, this young man wearing Gloucester's hump had received no kind of training as an actor. He was a wine merchant of twenty-four, who had spent most of his life in the quiet cathedral town of Lichfield. At first the audience watched him in silence, astonished by his daring, but their enthusiasm mounted as the play went on. (Only half of it was by Shakespeare; the rest was supplied by Colley Cibber, whose 'improved' version held the stage for 150 years.) They were startled into applause by the passionate sincerity with which he courted Anne at her husband's funeral, a scene 'thrown away' by the current favourites of the stage, but the turning-point of the evening came after Crookback dismissed the mayor and aldermen and flung his prayer-book to the ground. More surprises followed: the fierce relish of Gloucester's 'Off with his head! So much for Buckingham!'; the 'rage and rapidity' of his outburst:

The North! what do they in the North,
When they should serve their sovereign in the West?;

his fear and terror in the tent-scene; and the agonies of his death after the desperate fight with Richmond. Instead of declaiming the verse in a thunderous, measured chant, this actor *spoke* it with swift and 'natural' changes of tone and emphasis. Instead of patrolling the boards with solemn pomp, treading heavily from pose to traditional pose, he moved quickly and gracefully. Instead of standing on his dignity and marbling his face into a tragedian's mask, his mobile features illustrated all Richard's range of turbulent

feelings. He seemed, indeed, to identify himself with the part. It was all—oh, splendid heresy!—so *real*. The next day the wine merchant wrote to his disapproving brother: 'Last Night I Play'd Richard the Third to the surprise of Every Body and as I shall make very near £300 per annum by it, and as it is really what I doat upon, I am resolv'd to pursue it.' The letter was signed D. Garrick.

Few people were there to see Garrick's debut, on the historic night of October 19, 1741. Debuts of stagestruck amateurs, announced in this way, were frequent and often disastrous, and an anonymous performance of Gloucester drew only a small audience to Whitechapel. Although the evening's entertainment began at six, the play itself was presented 'gratis' in the interval of 'a concert of vocal and instrumental music' (prices: one, two and three shillings.) This was one of the many absurd evasions into which determined men were driven in the eighteenth century by the Government's restriction of theatrical enterprise. Only two London playhouses were then officially allowed to open during the season (from September to May): they were the 'patent houses' of Covent Garden and Drury Lane, which enjoyed a joint monopoly—by virtue of royal patents—over the drama of the spoken word. Around their rivalry revolves the history of the pre-Victorian stage, yet all their differences were forgotten at any challenge to their privilege; and in 1741 they were soon obliged to recognise the challenge delivered at Goodman's Fields. On that October night in Whitechapel a revolution had begun, unheralded but irresistible, with this performance of *Richard III*—acted by an amateur, between two parts of a musical concert, at a theatre without a licence, in defiance of the law.

Within a few weeks David Garrick was the talk of London. Hundreds were turned away from the little theatre every night. A fashionable audience was often in its place by five o'clock, ready to endure the legal camouflage of the 'concert' for the sake of seeing the new tragedian, and sometimes the stage itself was so crowded with spectators that they blocked the view from the boxes and the pit. The poet Pope, who had given up playgoing, was one of the many celebrities who made the expedition to the East End. 'That young man,' he said, 'never had his equal, and will never have a rival.' The politician Pitt avowed that this novice from the Midlands was the best actor England had yet produced. Although Thomas Gray was exaggerating when he wrote of 'a dozen Dukes of a night at Goodman's Fields,' peer after peer invited the young actor to dinner, in the safe knowledge that in spite of his calling he was a gentleman. 'I believe nobody (as an Actor) was ever more caress'd,' wrote Garrick to his brother, 'and my Character as a private Man makes 'em more desirous of my Company.' The enthusiasm was not unanimous, especially in the green rooms of Covent Garden and Drury Lane. James Quin, the leading actor of the day, dismissed Garrick's popularity as a merely modish novelty. 'Garrick,' he said contemptuously, 'is a new religion; the people follow him as another Whitfield, but they will soon return to church again.' To this, the newcomer replied in rhyme:

When Doctrines meet with general approbation,
It is not Heresy, but Reformation.

History—and the audience—were on Garrick's side: reformation was long overdue. 'If the young fellow is

right,' Quin announced, 'I and the rest of the players have been all wrong.' That, in fact, was the verdict of the town, and of posterity. Although this triumphant Richard was only the first sketch of a great performance, although 'the young fellow' was without training or experience, he leaped at once to the top of the profession.

Offstage, David Garrick was a man of uncommonly complex temperament and physical grace. A born mimic, he could—and would—act at the drop of a hat: by nature both cautious and mercurial, shrewd and generous, something of a chameleon in his very gregarious social life, he excelled as both artist and administrator. Agile and light in build, he was only five feet four in height, with small hands and feet, and unusual muscular control. His firm chin, big broad nose, expressive mouth and dark, lustrous eyes were set in a round and neutral face. His light tenor voice, of notable sweetness, was at the time of his debut probably still coloured by the accent of his Midland home. He was born in Hereford, on February 19, 1717, while his father—an officer in the dragoons—was on a recruiting campaign; and he was brought up in the garrison-cathedral town of Lichfield, to which Captain Peter Garrick retired for some years on half-pay. On neither side of the family were there stage connections. Too much should not be made of the 'typically French' build of David and his brother George, yet some credit for the actor's un-English mobility of features and eloquence of gesture may be taken by his grandfather, a Huguenot who fled to England when the Edict of Nantes was revoked. With six brothers and sisters, David enjoyed a childhood which was—unlike that of many famous players—apparently happy and secure, emotionally if not financially. His parents found it difficult

to make ends meet and to keep up appearances, but they clung firmly to their gentility, and Garrick later set great store by his status as a gentleman's son. When he first began to act the stage was still socially beyond the pale, yet Captain Peter's training helped him not only to establish his authority in the theatre but also to wield an influence outside it.

When he was fourteen, economic pressures at home became so severe that his father rejoined his old regiment on full pay and went off to Gibraltar, where he remained for five years, leaving David as the virtual head of the family. During the crucial years of his growth into manhood, the 'English Roscius' was thus plunged into both freedoms and responsibilities of unusual scope. In spite of the separation from his well-loved father, in spite of the genteel poverty of their life in Lichfield, and in spite of the penal drudgery of the local grammar school, where a petty tyrant tried to flog knowledge into his stoic victims, Garrick seems to have made the most of his adolescence. Witty and charming even as a boy, he was so much of a favourite with the officers of the Lichfield garrison that they sometimes took him to London on visits to the theatre, and on return he would keep them amused for weeks with his imitations of Cibber, Quin and the other stars of the day, for he was already an acute mimic with remarkable powers of memory and observation.

Stage-struck from an early age, Garrick was among the first in the house whenever the strolling players came to Lichfield (there were then scarcely any permanent theatres outside London). This hobby was shared by the tall, ugly son of the bookseller Michael Johnson. While David Garrick dreamed of being an actor, Samuel Johnson—

seven years his senior—laboriously planned a tragedy in blank verse. It was to Johnson that Garrick was sent to learn Greek and Latin, at his ill-fated 'private academy' in the nearby village of Edial; and it was with Johnson that Garrick set out on horseback for London, one March morning in 1737. When Captain Garrick came home in 1736, he resolved that David should settle down and take life seriously. He must be a lawyer. But first of all, the young man needed coaching, for he had learned little enough at the grammar school or at Edial, and he was sent to Rochester, where Dr. John Colson was to teach him 'mathematics, philosophy and humane learning.' Samuel Johnson, his companion on the road, was going to London to sell his tragedy and make his fortune. Within a few years these two ill-assorted provincials from Lichfield were to dominate the theatre and the literature of their time.

After a year at Rochester Garrick came of age, inherited a thousand pounds from his Lisbon uncle, and gave up all pretence of studying for the law. With his brother Peter, who had inherited a small sum from their father (who died a few weeks after David left Lichfield) he decided to go into the wine trade. They rented premises off the Strand in Durham Yard (on the site of the Adelphi), and while Peter stayed in Lichfield, David acted as London representative. He could scarcely have picked a better way of indulging his hobby, even if at first he did not set out deliberately to train himself for the stage. Among the main sources of custom for a wine merchant were the coffee-houses, then the centres of male social life in a small, compact, metropolitan culture (the playgoing population of Garrick's London has been estimated at 12,000). The best coffee-houses were across the Strand from Garrick's office, in

the neighbourhood of Covent Garden; and Covent Garden was the heart of the theatre world, for most of the actors lived in the surrounding streets, a few minutes from their work in the two 'patent houses' nearby. Garrick soon became known as a good companion, even if he was not a good salesman. These were his years of apprenticeship: watching histrionic form at Covent Garden and Drury Lane, joining in the post-mortems next morning over coffee, eavesdropping on backstage gossip, observing the passing show. He studied the methods of actors and dramatists, and assiduously practised the writing of plays and prologues. At that time, and for over a century to come, an evening at the theatre included at least one farce, ballet, pantomime or other 'after-piece', as well as the main five-act tragedy or comedy, and throughout the season the programme was changed from night to night. There were no 'long runs'. New plays did well if they were staged nine times in their first season, but if successful they remained in the repertoire of both theatres for years to come. Nor were there frequent changes of cast: supporting actors often stayed in the service of the Lane or the Garden for over twenty years, and stars continued to appear in their early successes long after they had outlived them.

In the spring of 1740 Garrick had the pleasure of seeing his comic sketch *Lethe* on the stage of Drury Lane. It was produced on a benefit night—that is to say, one of the nights toward the end of the London season given up to a particular player or group of players, who received all the box-office takings minus the nightly house charge (the manager's estimate of the running cost). This was a recognised form of salary supplement which persisted for over a century, although it was often known to result not

in a bonus but a loss. On this occasion it was the benefit of Henry Giffard, an Irish friend of Garrick who owned the new little theatre in Goodman's Fields (then closed under the Licensing Act of 1737). Another Irish friend was Charles Macklin, a noisy, belligerent actor who helped to clarify Garrick's own ideas by his harangues on the decline of the theatre, his programme of reform, and his revolutionary performance of Shylock, eight months before Garrick's own debut at Giffard's theatre. For forty years *The Merchant of Venice* had been replaced by a version in which Shylock appeared as a comic buffoon, with the red wig and ill-fitting clothes of the stage clown; but Macklin persuaded Charles Fleetwood, manager of Drury Lane, to revive most of the original play, and he himself, black-wigged, dressed in the red hat and black gaberdine of Venetian Jews in the sixteenth century, acted the character as a tragic villain. This was a personal triumph for Macklin, who repeated the performance for nineteen nights (an enormous success, by the nine-night standard of the time) and it may be said to prefigure the advent of Garrick. For Macklin not only brought Shylock to life: he challenged the conventions of contemporary acting, which Garrick was to destroy.

Until Macklin's Shylock and Garrick's Crookback burst upon the stage in 1741, English 'serious' acting was dominated by the fossilised style inherited from the great Restoration player Thomas Betterton—a formalised, rhetorical and statuesque mode of stage behaviour, in which *manner* was all, and the means had become confused with the end of playing. Energy, emotion and passion were suppressed as vulgar; an elaborately artificial code of expression (or '*Theatric* way of speaking') was confused

with 'classical' art; and actors stood tiptoe on their dignity throughout the play. With deep solemnity, tall plumes of feathers nodding above their periwigs (traditional head-dress of the tragic hero), Quin and Cibber moved into stereotyped attitudes and boomed out the verse with predictable sonorities (Macklin was dismissed from Covent Garden for refusing to talk in what he called 'the hoity-toity tone.') As Dr. Johnson wrote, some years later:

From bard to bard the frigid caution crept,
Till declamation roared, while passion slept.

Garrick explained to a friend that 'when first setting out in the Business of an Actor' he 'endeavour'd to shake off the Fetters of Numbers . . . I hate your Roarers.' At its best when applied to stage heroes in the pseudo-Roman mould, such as Addison's Cato, this technique reduced other characters to a common measure of 'dead, insipid pomp', stifling individual truth with generalised grandeur. Yet the burly Quin, for one, was clearly an actor of talent and power, particularly in comedy, and even as Macbeth—one of the roles in which his 'method' was least congruous—he won high praise from Garrick himself. That is one reason why 'little Davy' chose so well for his debut at Goodman's Fields, after careful discussions with Macklin and other friends. Not only was the role of Crookback well suited to his height, but—especially as corrupted by Colley Cibber—it gave Garrick a fine opportunity to show off the very qualities in which he surpassed the old guard: emotional range, expressive facial by-play, variety in speech, intensity and unity in characterisation. One critic noted with surprised approval,

in 1741, that: 'When three or four are on the stage with him, he is attentive to whatever is spoke, and never drops his character when he has finished a speech, by either looking contemptuously on an inferior performer, unnecessary spitting, or suffering his eyes to wander through the whole circle of spectators'—a revealing comment on current practice among the stars.

Not only did Garrick establish his dominion in tragedy, during that first astonishing season of 1741, but he showed his skill in comedy, too; and here there was equal need of reform. Although Garrick shocked and dismayed many admirers of his Crookback by 'condescending' to such parts as Costar Pearmain in *The Recruiting Officer* and Lord Foppington in *The Careless Husband*, the subtlety, grace, and realism which he brought to them seemed no less remarkable than the merits of his tragic acting. Only one of these roles—Bayes in the Duke of Buckingham's *The Rehearsal*—remained in Garrick's repertoire in later years, but he demonstrated at once that he was a great all-rounder. As Bayes, his excellence lay partly in the complete solemnity with which he played this jackass author (hitherto acted in broad, grinning caricature), and partly in the mimicry with which he had once delighted the Lichfield garrison. In the scene where Bayes coaches the players in a rehearsal of his own tragedy, Garrick burlesqued the leading actors of the day—Quin, Delane and Ryan—ridiculing with exact detail their sing-song voices, their heavy tread, their clumsy and deliberate gesture (Quin moved his arms, it is said, as if he were heaving ballast into the hold of a ship). This was a part of Garrick's frontal attack on the acting values of his time, in order to make way for his own brand of theatrical truth, and

although he later dropped these imitations at the special request of the indignant victims, his sabotage had already been successfully completed. When Garrick's first season at Goodman's Fields ended in May, 1742, he had acted nearly twenty characters and had given about 150 performances, appearing almost every night (including Christmas Day). Never again did he act so much, for so little reward: within a few months, his salary rose from six guineas a week to five hundred guineas, which Fleetwood paid him to appear at Drury Lane the following season. (After Garrick left, Giffard's little theatre in Whitechapel never opened its doors again: the 'patent houses' made sure of that.)

During the next five years, Garrick increased his reputation, widening his repertoire and his technique, in both London and Dublin (then the favourite summer rendezvous of stars from Drury Lane and Covent Garden). The old and new styles were on view at the opposing houses, and in the London season of 1746-7 they were actually seen together upon the same stage, when Garrick and Quin agreed to share the honours at Covent Garden. Each played his best roles, in friendly rivalry, watched by an audience which followed acting form and admired technical display, applauding 'points' and effects, with an eager partisanship now limited to the sports field and the jazz concert. Although Quin's supporters rallied to his Cato, and his Falstaff triumphed over Garrick's weak Hotspur, the theatre was half-empty when he rashly tried *Richard III*; and there was little doubt of the winner in this strange contest on that memorable evening when both men acted together in Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*. In the opposing roles of Lothario, the gay amorist, and Horatio,

the noble-hearted husband whom he wronged, Garrick and Quin dramatically illustrated the clash between their generations. The playwright Richard Cumberland wrote of Quin: 'With very little variation of cadence, and in a deep full tone, accompanied by a sawing kind of action which had more of the senate than of the stage in it, he rolled out his heroics with an air of dignified indifference. . . . When, after a long and eager expectation, I first beheld little Garrick, then young and light and active in every muscle and feature, come bounding on the stage—heavens, what a transition! It seemed as if a whole century had been stepped over in the transition of a single scene.'

This Covent Garden season, which included some of Garrick's most famous roles in comedy and tragedy, confirmed his leadership as an actor; and before it ended, he signed an agreement which put him into power as a manager. In partnership with James Lacy, at the cost of £8,000, Garrick became master of his own theatre and monarch of the English stage, after only five years in the profession. His home was Drury Lane—a musty, intimate, square-shaped old theatre, still much as it was when designed by Sir Christopher Wren. Its 'apron' stage projected about thirteen feet into the auditorium, filled with a restless, noisy and at times belligerent crowd of all classes in boxes, pit and galleries. Garrick's big scenes were played upon this apron with the audience on all sides, and not, as in the modern theatre, behind the picture frame of the proscenium arch. Light came from seventy-two candles, in six large chandeliers above his head, and—later in his career—from a row of footlights or floats. Candlelight also illuminated the auditorium at full

strength (such as it was) throughout the performance: not until over a century later was the house darkened during the play; yet, by modern standards, Garrick's audience endured a kind of hot, stuffy and murky twilight, for the candles might be said to give more heat than light and ate up the oxygen greedily. In this theatre, moreover, there was no attempt at realism in scenery, properties or costumes, for the audience was interested in the display of technique rather than in the hypnosis of illusion. The lack of aids which the modern player takes for granted makes all the more notable Garrick's long dominion not only over their minds but also over their emotions.

Garrick remained supreme at Drury Lane for nearly thirty years, as successful in management as in acting. In his private life, too, he made a lasting partnership, for in 1749 he married a young Viennese, Eva Maria Veigel—known on the stage as Mlle. Violette. Having given up her dancing career for love, Mrs. Garrick settled down in a remarkably happy and peaceful marriage, which endured until her husband's death. Rich, happy, and eminently respectable, the darling of all classes and the leader of the stage, Garrick took the fortunes of Drury Lane and the prestige of the whole theatre to unprecedented heights. 'He raised the character of his profession,' as Burke said, 'to the rank of a liberal art.'

To keep on his pinnacle was no sinecure. Other actors—Mossop, Powell, Barry, Henderson—threatened his place as the first player. Violent riots broke out when the audience took arms against his stage reforms and his 'foreign' novelties. Discontented players and frustrated playwrights waged a guerrilla war against his rule, in pamphlets, newspapers and whispering campaigns. There

were feuds, intrigues and betrayals. He was charged with being a miser, a bully, a hypocrite, with writing most of his own favourable notices and bribing the authors of the others, with ruining the chances of other artists. As anyone who wanted to make his way as an actor or an author depended upon either Drury Lane or Covent Garden, it is scarcely surprising if the actor-manager of one theatre for so many years was the focus of so much resentment, contempt, and envy; and his vanity, evasiveness and snobbery supplied his many enemies with ammunition. His unpopularity in some sections of his profession was increased by his preference for the company of writers, painters, and, above all, peers. Garrick dearly loved a lord. Some of his happiest hours were spent at Chatsworth and other great country houses, writing verse to his hosts, entertaining them with the kind of witty small talk in which he was so proficient, and doing his party pieces—notably, the dagger scene from *Macbeth*, Hamlet's 'start' at seeing the ghost, and the madness of King Lear. Yet although he may have chased, he was also pursued. In admitting him to dinner, his aristocratic admirers prepared the way for a recognition that his less captivating colleagues also had human rights. Their patronage, and what was more, their friendship, not only flattered 'little Davy's' abounding vanity (the life force of many great actors), but also helped him to keep the English theatre in health and high esteem.

To be fashionable for thirty years (with an occasional un-modish interregnum) demands greater powers than a talent for bribing the press and toadying to the nobility. Garrick was, first of all, a shrewd and resourceful manager, adept in compromise, alert to the demands of the box-

office, but always insisting upon high standards of production and performance. From his first Drury Lane season onwards, he demanded stricter attendance at rehearsals and sharper attention to discipline and work. He paid more heed to casting and to unity of style than was common in the eighteenth century, supervising two generations in the 'natural' acting with which he had ousted the 'formal' style of Quin and Cibber. 'I have seen you, with your magical hammer in your hand,' wrote the actress Kitty Clive to him, thirty years later, '*endeavouring* to beat your ideas into the heads of creatures who had none of their own. . . .' Yet unlike some stars of later days, he did not surround himself with mediocrities to make his own light shine more brightly. As a good manager, Garrick had the shrewdness to engage the best talent available, which included such artists as Macklin, Barry, Woodward, King, Shuter, Parsons, Weston, Powell, and Bensley, with Mesdames Pritchard, Clive, Cibber, Woffington, Yates, Pope, Abingdon and—not least—Siddons. His own appearances were carefully rationed: during his last decade at the Lane he acted only some twenty times a season, instead of the centuries he scored in early years. Garrick also attempted, with some success, to reform the manners of the audience. In his first season he showed his mettle by banning visitors backstage during the performance (unsolicited callers in green-rooms and dressing-rooms, not to mention the knots of spectators in the wings, had been a considerable nuisance for many years), and by requiring the occupiers of boxes to pay as they came in (it had been a popular amusement of young bloods to dodge payment at the end of the first act by playing hide and seek round the theatre). Some years later he succeeded,

despite hooligan protests, in clearing the stage on benefit nights, when the players' friends took their places on tiers of wooden benches behind the actors. Here, as in other things, Garrick had to move cautiously, for actors were still treated as servants of the public, and any signs of insubordination were punished by violent demonstrations among the audience.

Again, although Garrick was unconcerned about historical accuracy or unity of effect in dress and scenery, he took pains to provide rich spectacle and costumes, and introduced many improvements in stage lighting and effects. After 1765 both the auditorium and the stage of Drury Lane were illuminated much more clearly and evenly. He improved the comfort and appearance of the house, and increased the size of the company to over a hundred performers. Within a few years the nightly running cost jumped from £60 to £90, without a corresponding rise in the price of seats, yet Drury Lane continued to flourish. Pantomimes and after-pieces kept the treasury full. For staging such entertainments Garrick has often been attacked, yet he himself explained the situation once and for all in the prologue by Dr. Johnson which introduced his first season at Drury Lane:

The drama's laws, the drama's patrons give,
For we that live to please, must please, to live.

In Garrick's time, the majority of the drama's patrons wanted pantomime, spectacle, and farce: to keep his theatre open, and because he was a great showman, he gave them what they wanted: it was his duty—and his pleasure. The profits were used to finance his productions of Shakespeare and other dramatists, old and new. Here, too, Garrick

comes under heavy fire, for his crass 'improvements' of *Hamlet*, *A Winter's Tale*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear* and many other plays. Certainly it is hard for us to understand or forgive a man who sliced and mangled some of the greatest plays ever written, substituting his own pedestrian verse for Shakespeare's superb poetry, while declaring:

Tis my chief wish, my joy, my only plan
To lose no drop of that immortal man.

Yet Garrick was a man of his age. Actors are shackled more securely to the values of their time than any other artists. And until recent times all actors have shown the same calm but by no means ignorant assurance that they know better than Shakespeare. Thanks to Garrick's genius as an actor, and his understanding of his audience, the works of 'that immortal man' were kept alive on the English stage.

When Garrick retired in 1776 he was still at the height of his fame. He died on January 20, 1779. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, with five peers among the pallbearers, and posterity has kept his memory bright ever since. If, as Dr. Johnson sneered, 'more pains have been taken to spoil the fellow than if he had been heir-apparent to the Emperor of India'; if 'little Davy's' name is remembered when most of his great contemporaries in politics, war, religion and literature have been lost in oblivion; then there is good reason—and the best reason of all, of course, was his acting.

In 1761 Sir Joshua Reynolds painted his friend Garrick standing, undecided, 'between tragedy and comedy'; he was, as Dr. Johnson once acknowledged, 'a master' in

both; no other English actor (with the possible exception of Betterton) has been in the same position, and no other English actor has equalled the width of Garrick's range, in light and broad comedy, 'juvenile lead' and 'character part', romantic drama and Shakespearian tragedy. Although he was overwhelmed with manuscripts from aspiring playwrights during his long managerial career, and although he staged some 75 new plays (excluding after-pieces) in 29 years, few provided him with good acting parts in either tragedy or comedy, and none allowed him to exercise his full powers. He turned continually to the drama of the past, often altering the stock pieces of the repertoire without scruple, and on occasion he wrote the plays himself. As an author Garrick had a flair for plagiarism, borrowing situations from other men's plays, fitting stock roles to his colleagues and himself, and editing the result into a gay and witty vehicle for their talents. The gouty old Lord Chalkstone, in his own *Lethe*, was one of his most popular 'character' parts. Another was Fribble, in *Miss in her Teens*, which he adapted from a Parisian success. Exploiting his own littleness, as in *The Rehearsal*, by perching a hat that was much too small for him on top of his wig, he presented Fribble as a mincing, effeminate dandy, a familiar species in the coffee-houses of Covent Garden. 'Naturally monkeyish', as one critic phrased it, he is said to have imitated eleven men of fashion so distinctly that each victim recognised his reflection on the stage. Helped by Harry Woodward's Captain Flash, Garrick made *Miss in her Teens* a box-office hit in the Covent Garden season of 1746-7 which he shared with Quin. Garrick always excelled as a romantic amorist in the comedy of manners, and in that same season he

introduced one of the most successful portraits in this gallery—Ranger in Dr. Benjamin Hoadly's *The Suspicious Husband*, a well-made comedy of intrigue which retained its popularity on the stage until mid-Victorian times. 'It is one of the few *living* comedies,' wrote Percy Fitzgerald in 1868, 'is written with extraordinary animation and reads now almost as freshly as on the day it appeared.' Ranger, a somewhat chaster heir of the Restoration rakes, is an amorous law student of inexhaustible effrontery and appetite ('as every woman, who is young, is capable of love, I am very reasonably in love with every woman I meet'). To him a rope ladder at a bedroom window is a challenge (which the author gives him plenty of scope for meeting), but although he does his frank best to seduce three young ladies, virtue triumphs in the end and Ranger's own honest heart is pinned firmly on to his sleeve. This gave Garrick an excellent opportunity to step out of his comic and tragic disguises and to relax in his own personality, exerting his infectious gusto and radiant charm in the kind of lightweight role with which many modern actors make their one reputation.

In a different kind is Sir John Brute, the bullying drunkard of Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Wife*, a part in which Garrick successfully challenged Quin's much coarser and broader study. In his most riotous excesses, he was still a gentleman. This is how he appeared to G. C. Lichtenberg, who saw Garrick in 1775: 'In the beginning, his wig is quite straight, so that his face is full and round. Then he comes home excessively drunk, and looks like the moon a few days before its last quarter, almost half his face being covered by his wig; the part that is still visible is, indeed, somewhat bloody and shining with perspiration,

but has so extremely amiable an air as to compensate for the loss of the other part. His waistcoat is open from top to bottom, his stockings full of wrinkles, with the garters hanging down, and, moreover—which is vastly strange—two kinds of garters. . . . In this lamentable condition he enters the room where his wife is, and in answer to her anxious enquiries as to what is the matter with him (and she has good reason for inquiring) he, collecting his wits, answers: 'Wife, as well as a fish in the water'; he does not, however, move away from the doorpost, against which he leans as closely as if he wanted to rub his back. Then he again breaks into coarse talk, and suddenly becomes so wise and merry in his cups that the whole audience bursts into a tumult of applause. I was filled with amazement at the scene where he falls asleep. The way in which, with shut eyes, swimming head, and pallid cheeks, he quarrels with his wife, and, uttering a sound where 'r' and 'l' are blended, now appears to abuse her, and then to enunciate in thick tones moral precepts, to which he himself forms the most horrible contradiction; his manner, also, of moving his lips, so that one cannot tell whether he is chewing, tasting, or speaking: all this, in truth, as far exceeded my expectations as anything I have seen of this man.' In another popular scene the drunken Sir John attacks the watch, in women's clothes—and it was in this costume that Garrick later sat to Zoffany, the famous painter of theatrical portraits and conversation pieces, wearing a lace cap with pink ribbons and a yellow satin brocaded dress, holding the watch at bay!

Zoffany also painted Garrick in what was perhaps the most famous of all his comic roles—the small part of Abel Druggier, the oafish tobacconist's apprentice in *The*

Tobacconist, his own version of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. He had studied this almost as carefully as he did the Prince of Denmark, giving private rehearsals in the presence of such friends as Macklin before he brought the character to Drury Lane in 1744. With the shock-haired wig and grubby smock Garrick seemed to assume the identity of this knowing simpleton, wiping his own personality clear of its authority, grace and intelligence, and wearing a vacant stare as if it were his natural expression. His predecessor in the role, Theophilus Cibber, had made a stock buffoon of Drugger; his contemporary, Thomas Weston, presented 'a comic face of stupid awe and petrified astonishment, which excited universal mirth by its stolidity'; but Garrick let his face record a flood of feelings, in a *tour de force* of by-play and mime. When this Drugger first spoke to the tricksters Face and Subtle, said one witness, his face seemed 'to drop upon his tongue; it is all caution; timorous, stammering and inexpressible'; and then, as Subtle examined his chin, teeth and little finger for auguries, his features mutely expressed, in eloquent succession, fear, greed, vanity, delight, hope and simplicity. Again, when the mock-astrologers spelled out the name of Abel Drugger in the stars as the name of a man who will be great, Garrick made him 'keep his joy to himself, for to blurt it out before everyone would be lacking in decency. So Garrick turns aside, hugging his delight to himself for a few moments, so that he actually gets those red rings round his eyes which often accompany great joy, at least when violently suppressed, and says to himself: "That is my name." The effect of this judicious restraint is indescribable, for one did not see him merely as a simpleton being gulled, but as a much more ridiculous creature, with an air of

secret triumph, thinking himself the slyest of rogues.' Whether Jonson intended that effect or not (he did not write the line concerned), there was no doubt of Druggier's popularity. Fanny Burney, who saw Garrick in this role after watching his *Lear*, wrote at a later date: 'Never could I have imagined such a metamorphose as I saw; the extreme meanness, the vulgarity, the low wit, the vacancy of countenance, the appearance of *unlicked nature* in all his motions.' The same note is struck by Arthur Murphy: 'He represented the tobacco-boy in the truest comic style: no grimace, no starting, no wild gesticulation. He seemed to be a new man.' Here was an example of that transubstantiation which marks one kind of greatness in acting: the visible erasure of one identity by another, the radical change of being, the illusion of rebirth. Weston, whom some people thought to equal Garrick in the role, was funny in himself, 'one of the drollest creatures on whom I have ever set eyes,' said Lichtenberg. As soon as he appeared, he set the house in a roar. But it was always the same joke: the rich absurdity of being Weston. Garrick was a different man every time.

In 'serious' drama Garrick had a superb gift for pathos, excelling as a victim and a repentant sinner. Persecuted and harried to death, he brought tears to eighteenth century eyes for thirty years by his sufferings on the stage. In blackface he triumphed as Oronooko, the noble savage in captivity who gave his name to Mrs. Aphra Behn's play, and he also appeared as Osmyn, the no less noble Moor in captivity from Congreve's *Mourning Bride*. Other roles included Jaffier, the half-hearted revolutionary in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* (an actor's favourite for some two hundred years); Chamont, the romantic avenger of

the same author's *The Orphan*; Hastings in Rowe's *Jane Shore*; Beverley, the doomed hero of Edward Moore's *The Gamester*; and old Lusignan in *Zara*, adapted by Aaron Hill from Voltaire. Yet it was, of course, in Shakespeare that Garrick scored his greatest triumphs. Benedick was his only role in Shakespearian comedy; he failed as Antony, Hotspur and Othello; but as Macbeth, as Hamlet and as Lear he was acclaimed as the best actor of his age.

With the century's disregard of historical accuracy, he appeared as Macbeth in the scarlet coat of an officer in the army of George II, with a wig, a silver-laced waistcoat, and breeches of contemporary cut—the Thane of Cawdor in modern dress. He retained the singing witches and dancing furies with which Sir William Davenant had turned the play into a melodramatic Restoration pantomime, and he wrote in a long dying speech, in order to give himself scope for some of his favourite effects. Yet this Macbeth was first billed 'as written by Shakespeare,' and was indeed closer to the original than any version staged since the Restoration. It was also probably better acted—when Mrs. Pritchard appeared with Garrick—than at any time in the play's history. Quin had played the first two acts in his best blustering style, but after that his performance seems to have collapsed and the play itself was thought to be responsible. It was left to Garrick to show, even in this tailored draft, the pity, horror and poetry of the rest. Some critics found him too melancholy, with 'an excessive dejectedness of mind', in presenting Macbeth's guilt. Yet few were unmoved in the dagger scene. As Macbeth stared at the vision, his face seemed to blanch and contract with terror, giving the audience a

'sense of real *seeing*'. After the murder, with the real dagger in his bloody hands, 'he was absolutely scared out of his senses; he looked like a ghastly spectacle, and his complexion grew whiter every moment, till at length, his conscience stung and pierced to the quick, he said in a tone of wild despair:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand. . . .'

In the banquet scene one night, so the story goes, when Garrick came to the line 'There's blood upon thy face', he spoke it with such urgency and looked so intently at the first murderer that the actor put his hand to his face with a start and said: 'Is there, by God!' When the ghost of Banquo rose, said an admiring observer, 'how repeatedly astonishing [was] his transition, from the placidly merry to the tremendously horrific!'

It was in rapid transitions and gradations of feeling and facial expression that Garrick particularly scored. 'He falls from fury into tears with a breath; and is pure and entire in both sensations.' Never was this power more strikingly exemplified, perhaps, than in *King Lear*. He himself thought this 'the finest tragedy', although much of what he admired was the work not of William Shakespeare but of Nahum Tate, whose version held the stage for over 150 years. In this *King Lear* there is no Fool, Edgar and Cordelia marry, and Lear regains both his wits and his throne in a comfortably happy ending. One of Garrick's great moments, indeed, was in his stage battle with the ruffians who try to murder Lear and Cordelia. Even in print, Shakespeare's original shocked Dr. Johnson to the core, and would have been unthinkable on the stage.

Cordelia's death made demands which eighteenth century playgoers would not accept: they set limits to their emotional responses, and expected an orderly arrangement of experience. Like the poetry, the agony of *King Lear* was thought to be primitive and irregular. Both needed levelling and improvement by more civilised minds. But even with the terror and the pity so carefully diluted, Tate's *King Lear*—as played by Garrick—harrowed the house. Actors and spectators wept freely. At one performance even a soldier on duty (for many years two red-coats stood guard beside the stage every night) was seen to break down and weep. In eighteenth century England, with all its worship of the golden mean, it was not thought 'common' to reveal your feelings; and emotions, in the theatre at least, were much more inflammable than in the neutral audience of today.

Garrick wore a grey and rather fluffy wig, but allowed no beard to mask his facial by-play, unhampered by an excess of 'old man' make up. He walked with a crutch, and appeared in virtually modern dress, with the ermine-trimmed coat which was prescribed for most stage kings. 'I never see him coming down from one corner of the stage, with his old grey hair standing, as it were, erect upon his head, his face filled with horror and attention, his hands expanded, and his whole frame actuated by a dreary solemnity,' wrote one playgoer, 'but I am astounded, and share in all his distresses; one might interpret from the dumbness of his gesture.' One of his great moments was the curse on Goneril. Flinging away his crutch, he fell suddenly on to one knee, stretched out his arms, clenched his fists, threw back his head, and began to speak—trembling with anger in 'a broken, inward,

struggling utterance'—with increasing speed and volume: 'it seemed,' said Macklin, 'to electrify the audience with horror,' till he ended in a burst of tears. Garrick had full command of pathos, too: not only in the final scene did he draw the audience's tears, with:

Do not laugh at me,
For as I am a man I think that lady
To be my child Cordelia,

but also, less aptly, in such speeches as:

I will do such things—
What they are I know not. . . .

And the Tate version gave him a triumphantly happy ending with:

Old Lear shall be a king again,

a cry in rapture which, it seems, usually brought the house down. It was in Lear's madness, however, that Garrick excelled. 'He had no sudden starts, no violent gesticulation,' wrote Arthur Murphy, 'his movements were slow and feeble, misery was depicted in his countenance; he moved his head in the most deliberate manner; his eyes were fixed, or, if they turned to any one near him, he made a pause, and fixed his look on the person after much delay; his features at the same time telling what he was going to say before he uttered a word. During the whole time he presented a sight of woe and misery, and a total alienation of mind from every idea, but that of his unkind daughters.'

From contemporary evidence, Garrick appears to have solved the problems facing the actor of this great role—the combination of age and strength, pathos and terror, madness and reason—by emphasising the weakness and

feebleness of an old man, with the indispensable help of Nahum Tate in scaling down Lear's size. He showed, another admirer noted, 'in the very whirlwind of passion and of madness, such an exact attention to propriety, that it is still the passion and the madness of a king.' Garrick's tall and handsome rival, Spranger Barry, also exhibited a regal dignity in the role, together with the gift of pathos that helped to make him so great a favourite; but in the words of a contemporary wit:

A king—ay, every inch a king,
Such Barry doth appear;
But Garrick's quite a different thing,
He's every inch King Lear.

The third of Garrick's major Shakespearian successes was Hamlet. He was dressed, during the early part of Garrick's career, in a simple, black, contemporary suit, with a plain neckcloth, so that the Prince of Denmark looked something like an English scholar; in later years, it seems, his dress was richer. Although there were frequent corruptions and cuts in the text (he omitted, for example, the 'Now might I do it pat' soliloquy), this was closer to Shakespeare than the Macbeth or Lear, and Garrick discarded some of the 'traditions' that had grown up in the past seventy years—notably, the slow music which accompanied Hamlet's entrances. He needed no such aid. 'When Garrick entered the scene,' Arthur Murphy wrote, 'by the force of deep meditation he transformed himself into the very man. He remained fixed in a pensive attitude, and the sentiments that possessed his mind could be discovered by the attentive spectator. When he spoke, the tone of his voice was in unison with

the workings of his mind . . .': a practice obvious enough to modern playgoers but then audacious in its novelty. In the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, said Murphy, 'his voice and attitude changed with wonderful celerity, and, at every pause, his face was an index to his mind.' But it was at the entrance of the ghost that Garrick's silent facial miming made its most celebrated effects. A word-picture of that scene has been preserved for us by the invaluable Lichtenberg, in 1775:

'The theatre is darkened; the whole audience of some thousands are as quiet, and their faces are as motionless, as though they were painted on the wall of the theatre; even from the farthest end of the playhouse one could hear a pin drop. When Horatio says, "Look, my lord, it comes!" Garrick turns sharply, and at the same moment staggers back two or three paces with his knees giving way under him; his hat falls to the ground and both his arms, especially the left, are stretched out nearly to their full length, with the hands nearly as high as the head, the right arm more bent, the hand lower, and the fingers apart; his mouth is open; thus he stands, rooted to the spot, with legs apart, but no loss of dignity, supported by his friends. . . . His whole demeanour is so expressive of terror that it made my flesh creep even before he began to speak. The almost terror-struck silence of the audience probably did much to enhance this effect. At length he speaks, not at the beginning but at the end of a breath, with a trembling voice, "Angels and ministers of grace, defend us," words which supply anything this scene may lack, and make it one of the grandest and most terrible which will ever be played on any stage. As the ghost goes off the stage a few moments later, Hamlet still remains motionless, his

sword held out so as to make him keep his distance, and at length, when the spectator can no longer see the ghost, he begins slowly to follow him, now standing still and then going on, with sword still upon guard, eyes fixed upon the ghost, hair disordered, out of breath, until he too is lost to sight. You can well imagine what loud applause accompanies this exit. It begins as soon as the ghost goes off the stage, and lasts until Hamlet also disappears. . . . This was the scene which so terrified the simple countryman Partridge, in Henry Fielding's famous novel *Tom Jones*, that he fell into so violent a trembling that his knees knocked upon each other.' Boswell once asked Dr. Johnson: 'Would not you, sir, start as Garrick does if you saw a ghost?' 'I hope not,' replied the Doctor. 'If I did, I should frighten the ghost.'

To *prove* that Garrick is a great actor is, of course, impossible, and some people believe that he has been overvalued by posterity. He seemed great, they say, only by contrast with the marionettes who preceded him. The very rarity of his versatility makes them cry him down as a tragedian: it is *unnatural*, such critics imply, for a man who excels as Abel Dragger to triumph as Lear: success in comedy can only be won by lower natures, for comedy is a lower order of creation. In Shakespeare, these snobs suggest, Garrick was little more than an accomplished but superficial 'character actor.' Eighteenth century audiences knew no better. Yet was it not, then, an extraordinary feat to keep his 'novelty value' through thirty years and two generations and to take in not only the English but the French as well? All his triumphs, say other conscientious objectors, were made in 'actor-proof'

parts: he edited every role to fit his own range. But what other player in our history has encompassed a range so magnificently wide with such enduring strength and diversity? Others, again, point out that although Garrick might appear to be 'natural' beside Quin, he would look elaborately artificial beside Olivier. Even in 1763 he was criticised for being at times 'too stiff and prolix' in colloquial and narrative passages. Like all actors, moreover, he had his mannerisms: he resorted to a 'start' too persistently, he employed 'a sort of hesitating stammering', especially in his death scenes, and his pauses were sometimes 'a trap for applause where he could reasonably expect none.' Yet Garrick never ceased to develop and to change his performances. After his long holiday abroad in 1765 there seems to have been a particularly noticeable evolution in his style towards greater easiness and informality, and he 'entirely dropt that anxious exertion at the close of a speech, both in look and behaviour, which is called by the comedians a clap-trap.'

All these comparisons between eighteenth century 'artificial' and twentieth century 'natural' are false. Garrick acted for his audience, not for posterity. If he were alive today, he would act for his audience in the manner fit for the time. He was no doctrinaire in 'naturalism' or 'theatricalism.' Like all artists of the theatre he worked in collaboration with the public, as both their servant, their ally and their master. He gave them more than they expected or understood, but he knew what they wanted and how they felt (or refused to feel): they were one of the most important conventions of his art. He stood for *order*, for an arrangement of experience and a mode of being more regular and complete than those in the offstage world, in an age which

exalted the orderly, the well-proportioned, the harmonious. Yet from the moment he set foot upon the stage, Garrick held the audience in thrall; he pulled them with him into the extremes, as they were measured on the eighteenth century scale; and he would do the same for us. 'Do not sacrifice your taste and feelings to the applause of the multitude,' he wrote to a young actor, 'a true genius will convert an audience to his manner, rather than be converted by them to what is false and unnatural.' But the 'natural', in Garrick's time, was what Garrick did: he 'converted' the multitude by his own reflection of 'nature', in the mirror of his face and voice and walk: the intricate, detailed labour of his make-believe, as Lear or Druggier, had the effortless, inevitable truth of reality, beyond realism, that only a great actor can provide.

II

JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE

LONG before the doors of Drury Lane Theatre opened, on the evening of September 30, 1783, a large crowd had gathered in the street: and at half-past five there was a fierce rush up the gallery stairs and into the pit, where people fought for places on the benches. In the candlelight the famous playhouse looked and smelt and sounded much as it had done throughout the last hundred years, with the whiff of stale beer, oranges and history, the cries of women selling fruit and playbills, the blur of gay colours in the boxes. Impatient for the programme to begin, the hot-faced, loud-mouthed customers in the upper gallery whistled and howled and stamped, much as they had often done in the days of Betterton and Garrick. Behind the scenes and below the stage, in dressing-rooms, green-rooms and corridors, there were the usual last-minute fidgets, rumours and small disasters. But this was not just another first night. In the boxes, ranged in three tiers of varying elegance, there was already by half-past six an unusually large and punctual parade of fashionable society, and the throng of carriages outside was as chaotic as on the evenings when Mrs. Siddons, the talk of London, was playing. They had come to see an actor make his London debut in *Hamlet*.

At the end of the procession, as the courtiers filed into a rather tatty throne-room, the audience saw a tall and

handsome young man of twenty-six. His Roman nose was held high in the air, and his black hair was powdered in the modern style. He moved slowly, with deliberate grace: he took up attitudes, with statuesque composure: he declaimed the verse, with measured dignity. His long, stern face was sorrowful and his bearing was royal. '*How like his sister*', they said to each other all around the theatre, at the Prince of Denmark's first appearance, and they waited for the thunderclap of genius. For this was the brother of Mrs. Siddons, and it was rumoured that he was also her equal. John Philip Kemble had come to town.

Instead of the everyday dress of an English gentleman, he probably wore an Elizabethan-cum-Stuart doublet and hose; the first draft of the 'Vandyke' fancy dress, which turned Hamlet from a contemporary into an historical character (though Kemble's innovation is sometimes dated later), and persisted for over half a century. This was not Kemble's only departure from theatrical precedent that evening. To all such deviations the audience, steeped in the classic repertoire and wise in stage technique, was exceptionally alert, and each of the 'new readings' was the talk of the playhouse.

Although billed 'as originally written by Shakespeare,' this *Hamlet* was edited with traditional ruthlessness. Kemble also absurdly omitted the instructions to the players, 'upon the modest principle, that he must first be admitted a master in the faculty, before he presumed to censure the faults of others.' Yet compared with other plays in the Shakespearian canon *Hamlet* was treated with relative respect on the eighteenth century stage, and Kemble had better reason for other amendments, which

were mostly to the 'business' of playing. Critics noted that he kneeled when the Ghost disappeared (through a trapdoor), and at 'Slanders, sir', in replying to Polonius, he tore the page out of his book. One detail which excited a special buzz of comment was that in following the Ghost he turned his left hand towards the spectre and trailed his drawn sword behind him in his right hand, whereas every Hamlet hitherto had unfilially presented the point of his sword at his dead father. It was not only in business, however, that John Philip Kemble was recognised as an innovator. Instead of the relaxed and flexible style of acting associated with the ' Garrick school' which was then in command of the London stage, he presented a grave, intense but sculptural formality. '*How original*,' said some connoisseurs in the pit: '*how unnatural*,' said their neighbours—and at once an argument began that was to continue for most of Kemble's life.

He was not, after all, equal to his sister Sarah, and the thunderclap of genius never came—on that night, at least. Yet with this performance at Old Drury he made his name as a leading young tragedian, and launched a London career that was to establish him among the great English actors. Drury Lane had lacked a tragedian of the first rank since Garrick retired to Hampton Wick, and the newcomer—unlike his principal rival, plump John Henderson of Covent Garden—appeared to have the face and the build for tragedy. By the end of *Hamlet* (and the play ended, as in Garrick's time, before the entry of Fortinbras), it was obvious that he also had the mind for it. *Too much mind*, said some objectors from the start. For thirty years he was in command, but Black Jack—as his enemies called him—was always a controversial artist, and pos-

terity has not unanimously voted him a place in the Valhalla of the stage.

John Philip Kemble was born on February 1, 1757 at Prescot, a few miles from Liverpool, where his parents had stopped to act for a night or two. Roger and Sarah Kemble were strolling players, performing in the villages and towns of the West Midlands, and John Philip was their first son. Born into the theatre and brought up in a hamper, as it were, he was often required to take the stage himself in childhood, together with his sister Sarah. In those days there were no restrictions on juvenile labour, and family theatricals were a recognised way of saving money. The steadily increasing family of Kembles shared the usual hardships and humiliations of the stroller's life—nine of the twelve were born in different towns—but although they had no illusions about the glamour of the stage, and although Roger Kemble forbade them all to make acting their career, most of them obstinately tried to follow in father's footsteps, and three at least arrived at the top of their trade.

As the son of a Roman Catholic actor, John Philip Kemble learned a double isolation in childhood. Acting had not yet become one of the liberal professions, and the prestige won by Garrick in London did not extend to strollers, who were often treated as social pariahs. Roman Catholics, moreover, were denied elementary rights by law. This status of being an 'outsider' had an obvious influence on Kemble's life and work, and it was confirmed by his education. Having attained a certain settled prosperity Roger Kemble determined to turn his eldest son into a Catholic priest, and sent him at the age of ten to a

Catholic seminary in Staffordshire. From there, at fourteen, John Philip Kemble went to Douai. For two centuries this had been a nursery of the priesthood and a headquarters of the Catholic underground, and it was the nearest university open to an English boy brought up in the old faith. Even if Roger Kemble had been wealthy enough to think of Oxford and Cambridge, they were closed to non-Protestants.

At Douai John Philip demonstrated a prodigious memory and a skill in rhetoric, which earned him leading roles in the college theatricals. This may have served to inflame his secular ambitions, but however that may be, he discovered by the time he was eighteen that he had no vocation for the priesthood. His proud spirit rebelled against rigid discipline and self-mortification, and he longed for the egocentric splendours and miseries of the world into which he was born, a world he was resolved to conquer. Instead of humbling the will, as it was intended to do, Kemble's Jesuit training intensified his single-minded determination to dominate the English theatre: and it provided him with a classical education which, in setting him apart from his colleagues, helped him to lead them. This educational background was so uncommon that William Smith, one of the very few graduates of public school (Eton) and university (Cambridge) on the stage, was generally known as 'Gentleman' Smith.

In the winter of 1775 John Philip Kemble ran away from Douai and came back to England. Landing at Bristol, he tramped through the West Midlands in search of his parents, whom he found in Brecknock—his sister Sarah's birthplace—a few days before Christmas. The season of goodwill made no impression upon Roger Kemble.

Whatever John Philip may have hoped, his father was furiously angry. After so much money had been spent on his education, the young blockhead had thrown it all away—to be an actor. It was an unforgivable waste of opportunities. Disowned by his father, John Philip Kemble set out to make his living as a strolling player with only a few guineas in his pocket, collected by a whip-round in the family troupe.

Even for a veteran, life 'on the hoof' in midwinter was often very severe. For an inexperienced boy, accustomed to the sheltered austerity of Douai (he liked it well enough to send his favourite brother Charles there, in later years) that apprenticeship must have seemed unexpectedly hard. But he was resolved to prove that Roger Kemble was wrong: he *had* to be an actor. There are many legends of his bitter poverty in this period of initiation. At one time he toured the villages giving moral lectures in the best Douai style, accompanied by an equally desperate fellow-actor who gave conjuring tricks, and the pennies they took from the yokels often paid for food and shelter. Sometimes he had to exist on raw turnips, grubbed up in the fields as he tramped through the countryside: sometimes he had to act without a shirt; in Worcester he suffered the shame of being jailed, because he had failed to pay for a new suit. This proved, however, to be the turning-point of Kemble's career, for when he appealed for help to his sister Sarah she came to the rescue and brought him to Liverpool, where she was at that time the leading lady in the local theatre. Thanks to her influence, he was engaged by the manager in minor roles, and set his foot upon the ladder of fame—after only eighteen months of roughing it.

Kemble began his acting life with four great advantages,

although not all were immediately apparent. He had a genius for a sister, who paved the way for his own success; he was tall, handsome and knew how a gentleman should behave; he had an inexhaustible capacity for hard work—on himself; and he knew exactly where he was going. His progress was, by the standards of the time, unusually rapid. After only a year at Liverpool he moved up another rung to Tate Wilkinson's company, which played in prosperous theatres at Hull, York, Leeds and other cities, and was probably the best of all provincial troupes. Within a short time Kemble was taking roles away from the leading man, and began a bout of literary activity. He composed ephemeral nonsense, for the most part, but it helped to establish the author as that rare prodigy—an educated actor—among the literati of York and later of London.

York at the turn of the century was still something of a regional capital, with a relatively strong, self-contained culture of its own. Dublin was even more independent and important, especially in the world of theatre, and there Kemble went in the autumn of 1781. He had learned a great deal from Wilkinson, but there was still considerable room for improvement in this tall, rather clumsy and aloof young man. Kemble was disappointed with the 'idleness, drunkenness and dirt' of the little playhouse in Smock Alley, and with the personality of its manager Richard Daly. Daly was, in turn, disappointed with the acting of Kemble, to whom he was paying the high salary of five guineas a week, but who failed at first to impress the Dublin public. Within a few weeks, however, the tragedian was taken up by Captain Robert Jephson, a dramatist and local celebrity, who groomed him for the starring role in his own play *The Count of Narbonne*, a

version of Horace Walpole's famous novel *The Castle of Otranto*. Jephson went so far as to hire a drill-sergeant and a dancing-master ('No Actor in the World,' Kemble wrote to him, 'stands more in need of Improvement than I do'), and made the training of Kemble's voice his personal responsibility (he had theories about voice-production, and set out to cure some of the actor's faults in breathing and delivery). As a result of this patronage, it seems, Kemble's acting was much improved, and in *The Count of Narbonne* he scored a personal triumph, followed—again under Jephson's tuition—by *Macbeth*. It is noteworthy that it was not on the stage that Kemble first engaged the Captain's attention, but at the dinner-table, where his classical education and gentlemanly manners won friends and influenced people throughout his career. By the end of his season at Smock Alley, Kemble was earning ten guineas a week.

Dublin was the last station in Kemble's progress to the capital. In October, 1782, his sister Sarah—returning to Drury Lane after seven years in the provinces—gave her epoch-making performance as Isabella, in *Isabella: or, The Fatal Marriage*, which made her the idol of London: and she did not fail to advance John Philip's claims to consideration. Before long the talent scouts were in Dublin, and Kemble was approached by the managements of both Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Not surprisingly, he signed a contract with Old Drury, his sister's theatre, and it was thus that he came to act in *Hamlet* on that auspicious autumn night in 1783.

In spite of the success of this performance, Kemble's advance was checked at first by theatrical etiquette. The

senior actors in the company had acquired prescriptive rights in most of the leading parts in the repertoire, and the newcomer—however ambitious he might be—had to bide his time until Tom King (the manager) and ‘Gentleman’ Smith (a favourite in comedy) surrendered their roles through retirement or death. Had Kemble electrified the town, in the way of ‘the divine Sarah’, his seniors might have been induced to capitulate more quickly, but the very gravity and unfamiliarity of his playing meant that his progress was made more slowly, and although his following grew steadily, there was an articulate opposition in the press to his ‘new readings’ and his formal style. All the while, however, he established himself in the theatre, won influential friends outside it, and developed his technique. Old Tom Sheridan, the proprietor’s father, coached him for *King John*, and he made a point of studying the methods of John Henderson (the only actor, he said in later life, from whom he had ever learned anything of value). In that first Drury Lane season he played Hamlet twelve times, and took twelve other roles, including Sir Giles Overreach, Richard III and Shylock (in all of which he was inferior to Henderson, as in later years to Cooke and Kean). Thirteen roles in nine months is, by modern West End standards, an unimaginable variety, yet Kemble was relatively unemployed, for he appeared only fifty-five times during the season. In the 1784-5 season he appeared even less frequently, but in his third season he had an unpredictable stroke of luck. Gentleman Smith decided to retire, Kemble was allowed to play some of King’s roles, and—what was even more decisive—the sudden death of John Henderson, at the age of 39, removed his chief rival as tragedian of the day and

heir to Garrick. From now on Kemble sometimes appeared as often as six times a week, in such roles as Macbeth and Othello, and the change in the balance of power was registered by a noticeable swing in his favour among the critics (some of whom were converted to the Kemble style with suspicious promptitude). He did not forget, moreover, the importance of being earnest, if he was to gain the allegiance of the elite. In 1786 he published an essay on the character of Macbeth, which Hazlitt later dismissed as 'literary foppery', but which served to consolidate his reputation as a gentleman-scholar among the aristocratic patrons of the stage.

In the autumn of 1788, when old Tom King retired in disgust from the management of Drury Lane, John Philip Kemble seemed a natural choice as his successor. Although he was only thirty-one, and it was but five years since his debut in London, he had the ability, authority, education and family connections which no other candidates could claim. And he set out, with high hopes, to reform this 'Slaughter-House of Dramatic Poetry'—as one visiting Frenchman called it—in spite of the problem represented by its chief proprietor, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a problem whose enormity was, in the end, to drive John Philip and his sister from the theatre.

Sheridan's brilliance as an orator (most notable in the trial of Warren Hastings) and as a dramatist (in *The School for Scandal* and *The Rivals*) was not accompanied by any aptitude for theatrical management. He neglected Drury Lane for Parliament and Carlton House, yet kept control of backstage affairs in his own capricious and inefficient hands. It required uncommon patience and persistence to get Sheridan to keep appointments and

make decisions, yet he would not delegate his power. Tom King complained that he had no authority to hire or dismiss actors, even to order so much as the cleaning of a costume. Only Sheridan could authorise spending at Drury Lane, and it was almost impossible, at times, to make him pay the company and staff. Wages were often weeks in arrears, for Sheridan used the treasury to finance his own heavy expenditure as a Whig politician in high society. Stage-hands and actors had to make do, somehow, until he could be cornered and persuaded—often under the threat of a strike by the stars—to disgorge a few pounds. Yet for many years disaster was kept at bay by 'Sherry's' notorious charm, which not even Mrs. Siddons could withstand, and by the talents of the Kemble family.

Kemble could do nothing about reforming the finances of Drury Lane, when he succeeded King as manager in 1788, but he did his best to improve the standards of performance and production. He was still at the mercy of Sheridan's whims, but the proprietor gave him greater liberty than he had permitted King to enjoy. From the beginning, he insisted on taking rehearsals seriously and introduced a much stricter discipline than had been known for years. Taking no pains to be popular in the theatre, he soon gained a reputation as a martinet and a reformer. Kemble's reforms were most conspicuous in the stage management of minor players and crowds ('the whole tribe of mobs, whether civil or military plebeians') and in the costume and scenery of his Shakespearean revivals. He set out to stage the classics on a grand and 'appropriate' scale, combining scholarship and spectacle, and is said to have spent as much upon one of these productions as his predecessors spent on an entire

season. Instead of allowing actors to wear, in effect, what they liked—John Henderson, for example, boasted that he wore the same costume for ten different roles—Kemble supervised the details of their dress and at times insisted upon a kind of archaeological accuracy. (He fined Mrs. Crouch, the singing star of his company, five guineas for refusing to appear in the dress allotted to her.) Instead of bringing out the old stock scenery ('nothing could be less accurate, or more dirty, than the usual pairs of low flats,' notes his devoted biographer James Boaden), he engaged the artist William Capon to paint special decor; and Capon applied himself to stage design with a romantic antiquarian passion that matched Kemble's own, and an unprecedented care for detail (he paid several visits to the Tower of London in order to paint a set for Kemble's *Richard III*).

In the first month of his first season at Drury Lane Kemble produced seven Shakespearian plays, in all of which he starred, and during his career he staged twenty-five of the canon. His devotion to Shakespeare was indeed the outstanding feature of his management. Every season he read as many as a hundred new plays, but few indeed were ever produced, and these were seldom of any merit. Kemble saw well enough that, as Boaden writes, 'the elder dramatists alone afforded him sufficient scope', and he told Boaden (himself an aspiring author) that he was not interested in new work. 'What could be expected now in the way of the regular drama,' he asked, 'that previously had not been better done?' Under his command Drury Lane was a temple of the classics, presented with lavish showmanship and processional pomp (he hired nearly 150 extras for *Coriolanus*), and subsidised by the pantomimes,

musical farces and operatic spectacles which shared the bill and drew the crowds.

By modern standards both Kemble's reforms and scholarship may seem ludicrously inadequate. Like his great forerunner, Garrick, he mangled the texts of which he was supposed to be the custodian. He used Dryden's operatic version of *The Tempest*, the Cibber 'improvement' of *Richard III*, the ruined *King Lear* of Nahum Tate and James Thomson. Even in his greatest Shakespearian success—*Coriolanus*—he employed a clumsily edited and rewritten text. In his choice of costume and scenery, moreover, he was still deeply influenced by stage convention. He played Benedick and Othello in the uniform of a British army officer of the day. As Macbeth he wore the traditional tragedian's plume of black feathers, until Sir Walter Scott—one of his closest friends—tore it from his bonnet and placed there the appropriate eagle quill (a gesture which, Kemble said, meant more to him than three rounds of applause). Mrs. Crouch, as one of the singing witches in that play, wore 'powdered hair, rouge, point lace and fine linen', and a critic noted that the minor characters in some productions appeared in 'a motley assemblage of dresses, such as perhaps were never seen in any age or nation'. In the Kemble *Coriolanus* there was 'a pretty exact representation of Hanover Square, and some very neat Bond Street shops appeared two, or three times, as parts of Rome.'

Yet it must be remembered that the demand for complete realism on the stage is a relatively recent development, and one which Kemble himself did much to foster by his pioneering revivals of Shakespeare. He entertained a generation which lacked our own self-conscious sense of

the past, and which did not expect the total illusion, the historic consistency or theatrical unity which we have come to take for granted. When the green carpet was still laid down for tragedy, and the scene was changed by stage hands in full view of the audience, who cared if Elsinore, Cyprus and Rome all looked much alike, and if all were populated by eighteenth century Londoners (sprinkled with visitors from a fancy dress ball)? Kemble *taught* people to care a little more, to look with fresh eyes at the stage pictures, so preparing the way for the next advance in scenic reform; and he in turn, like Garrick in his time, kept the Shakespearian repertoire alive, with his great sister's help, for the new audiences of an expanding London.

Even that hostile witness Leigh Hunt, who later waged a long press campaign against Kemble's domination of the London theatre, wrote that 'were it not for Mr. Kemble's exertions the tragedies of our glorious bard would almost be in danger of dismissal from the stage: and it does him infinite credit to have persevered in his exertions in spite of comparatively thin houses; to have added to the attractions of his poet by a splendour of scene as seasonable as well-deserved; and to have evinced so noble an attachment, and helped to keep up so noble a taste, in an age of mawkishness and buffoonery.' As a producer, *in his own age*, he was recognised as being 'wonderfully thorough and impressive', and Odell justly describes him as 'certainly the first great producer of Shakespeare on the English stage.' It may well be true, in William Robson's words, that 'he never had the means to do all that his genius and his love for his art inspired. . . .'

As an actor, during his thirty-four years on the London

stage, Kemble was most popular and at his best—outside Shakespeare—in the neo-classic drama (such as Addison's *Cato*) and the fashionable romantic German drama of Kotzebue: the Stranger, in the play of that name ('Silent record of unutterable anguish'), and Rolla in Sheridan's adaptation of *Pizarro*, were among his greatest triumphs. Other successes were Pierre, in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*; Penruddock, the morose misanthrope in Richard Cumberland's *The Wheel of Fortune*; Zanga, the baleful blackface Iago of Edward Young's *The Revenge*; 'the stricken, murmuring, lost Octavian' in George Colman's *The Mountaineers*; the remorseful villain, De Montfort, in Joanna Baillie's play of that name: and Norval in Home's *Douglas*. Forgotten plays, all of them, though not all justly so, which gave John Philip Kemble scope for his special virtues in depicting the suffering of strong men and the strength of heroes, (his style is discussed at the end of this chapter). In Shakespeare, Hamlet remained one of his most popular roles, and he played it, uneclipsed, until his retirement from the stage in 1817. He scored as Wolsey in *Henry VIII*, as Henry V, as King John, and as Macbeth, but his Othello was—said one of his most fervent admirers—'at most, only a part very finely played.' and his Lear was inferior to Garrick's. Kemble liked to act in comedy, but most witnesses found him ludicrously inept in light entertainment, although Charles Lamb, who could not 'disembarrass the idea of Hamlet from the person and voice of Mr. Kemble,' also admired his talents in Congreve and Wycherley. His biographer, James Boaden, insists that 'out of the management . . . he was the gentlest of all great actors. . . . He would do *anything*.' But what he *could* do was limited.

As manager of Drury Lane, John Philip Kemble had to face many problems apart from the feckless and dangerous irresponsibility of his employer. Two years after Kemble took over from Tom King, Sheridan decided that it was time to pull down the old theatre in which Betterton and Garrick had acted; and the new Drury Lane, opened in April 1794 with *Macbeth*, was twice the size of the old. It was, in fact, the largest playhouse in Europe, and held over 3,600 people. The 'Grand National' of Sheridan's dreams, however, cost far more to build than he had estimated (a hundred times as much as the original theatre) and from the beginning it was saddled with an even heavier burden of debt. Inevitably, Kemble found even greater difficulties in making Sheridan pay up, and the size of the theatre had a decisive effect on his career as a manager and his style as an actor. Intimacy and subtlety of playing were impossible in such grandiose barns as the new Drury Lane (and Covent Garden). 'Our theatres are fit for nothing,' Coleridge said, with pardonable exaggeration. 'They are too large for acting and too small for a bull-fight'; and the dramatist Richard Cumberland noted that Garrick's effects would evaporate 'in their passage through the misty void, and he would have found himself understood only in the neighbourhood of the orchestra.' This architectural inflation, itself a result of the absurd 'patents' which restricted the spoken drama to the Garden and the Lane, promoted the declamatory, statuesque acting of Kemble and his followers, and also confirmed the need for spectacular staging of the classics. Yet, even so, Drury Lane needed other baits to draw the town, and Kemble was obliged to present, on an increasing scale, what he sombrely called 'shewy after-pieces and laughable farces.'

There are, of course, many squalls in the life of a manager, especially one as imperious and violent as Kemble, who lacked Garrick's evasive diplomacy. He had to cope with temperamental leading ladies who harassed him by their absenteeism, intrigues, and civil wars. He fought a duel with one of his actors, who complained of Kemble's conduct at rehearsals ('Black Jack' contemptuously fired his pistol in the air, and nobody was hurt). He attacked a girl in her dressing-room, and had to make a public apology in the press. He rebuked the rowdy audiences for their grosser exhibitions of bad manners: although he was accustomed (like all his contemporaries) to a deal of noise, his Roman dignity was offended when apples or bottles landed on the stage. And he was exposed to a constant war of nerves by the theatre's creditors, including most of the company. In 1796 he at last resigned the management, and when he resumed that responsibility four years later it was only on the understanding that Sheridan would sell him a share in Drury Lane—he hungered for a theatre all, or even partly, his own. Not long after this deal fell through, John Philip Kemble left Drury Lane for ever. He was tired of having to beg for money, of having to fight Sheridan's battles, of tasting only the shadow not the substance of power, and towards the end of the 1802-3 season he had his final quarrel with Sheridan. This time he was impervious to the proprietor's charm: his patience was at last exhausted.

Kemble set out for a grand tour of Europe, in a specially constructed carriage, with his banker as travelling companion. It was the brief lull in the Napoleonic wars caused by the Peace of Amiens, and he was fêted in Paris

by the great French actor Talma and his colleagues of the Comédie Française. Soon after he returned, in April 1803, it was announced that all the Kembles were moving to Covent Garden Theatre, after twenty years at the rival house. He had agreed to pay £22,000 for a sixth share in the theatre, of which he paid £10,000 in cash; and he was to receive £200 a year as manager, and £37 16s. 0d. a week as actor. The playhouse was renovated in white and gold. Sixteen new private boxes—rented at £300 a season—were opened, for the aristocratic patrons who were rightly expected to follow Kemble and his sister from Drury Lane. And Kemble inaugurated his new regime, as he had begun his London career twenty years before, with *Hamlet*.

In 1803 it seemed, no doubt, as if he was opening a new and glorious chapter in his career. At forty-six he was still the acknowledged head of the English stage. No likely claimant to the title was in sight. His most dangerous competitor, George Frederick Cooke, who had come to Covent Garden in 1800, was a superb stage villain of great passion and power. In certain roles such as Richard III and Sir Giles Overreach he easily eclipsed Kemble, to whose patrician dignity he opposed plebeian energy. But Cooke had no staying power as a man and no conscience as an artist. With an earlier success, and even half Kemble's will-power and self-criticism, he might have reached the top. But it was not until his mid-forties that he was 'discovered' by London, after twenty-four years of provincial slogging, and by that time he was a confirmed alcoholic. He was often too drunk to appear (the bill had to be suddenly changed in such emergencies) and was often hissed or laughed off the stage. At his best his acting was erratic and disorderly, like that of many

'instinctive' players who depend not on technique but on 'inspiration'. In spite of his popularity with London audiences he was no match for Kemble, especially when—from 1803 onwards—he was obliged to work under Kemble's management. Yet John Philip was both shrewd and generous in his treatment of Cooke, who was allowed to keep such prize roles as Richard III and Shylock.

Free at last from the burdens of Drury Lane, Kemble—so it must have seemed in 1803—could now enjoy the independence which his proud spirit had craved so long: Covent Garden was not only solvent, but profitable, and he could confidently look forward to a prosperous future. On a provincial tour he could earn as much as £1,400 in four weeks, and unlike his successors in the modern theatre he could *keep* most of it. He was at liberty to consummate his ambitions as a scholar-artist by entertaining his aristocratic friends at his house in Great Russell Street (later absorbed by the British Museum); by continuing to enlarge his huge and valuable library (which included many rare Elizabethan quartos); and by producing the 'best' plays with what he called 'a union of propriety and splendour', beyond the resources of Sheridan. Yet everything went wrong for Kemble after he left Drury Lane.

The first setback to his hopes came in December, 1804 when Master William Betty, the young Roscius, arrived in London. This thirteen-year-old boy, who strutted and squeaked his way through the classic repertoire, came to town in a cloud of glory at unprecedentedly high pay. Covent Garden *and* Drury Lane paid him £50 a night, with a clear benefit every week (worth about £250 a time), but they reaped their reward, for Master Betty nearly

doubled their takings. The capital was at his feet. Nobody had ever cheered John Philip Kemble with this wild enthusiasm. Fox, for one, thought the boy's Hamlet 'finer than Garrick', and at Pitt's suggestion the House of Commons adjourned to watch it. In one season, it has been estimated, he earned nearly as much as Kemble had paid in cash for Covent Garden. John Philip and his sister withdrew from the stage, with understandable but discreet hauteur, while the Betty cult endured. Within four months, the boy prodigy was out of fashion, and the Kembles were back in power. Yet this extraordinary infatuation was something more than an outbreak of hysteria: its violence was fired by a revolt against the reigning stage dynasty. The audience was *bored* with John Philip Kemble. For twenty years, so it seemed to them, his tall aristocratic figure had dominated the stage, striking noble, classic attitudes in noble, classic roles; his slow, rather hoarse voice, with its eccentric pronunciations, had droned round pit, box and gallery; and it was always the same Kemble, in the same plays. In those twenty years the London audience had changed: Kemble had not. He had made himself into an institution. The adulation of Master Betty, in the season of 1804-5, was the first public demonstration that the public wanted something more.

Three years after the infant Roscius disappeared, Kemble suffered a much more damaging blow. In the early morning of September 20, 1808, Covent Garden Theatre caught fire and was burned out in four hours. Twenty-two people were killed, and most of the theatre's scenery, wardrobe, manuscripts and records went up in smoke. The loss was estimated at over £150,000, and only a small part of this could be met by the insurance com-

panies. For Kemble, in particular, it was a disaster: after only five seasons his theatre was destroyed, and he had to start again from scratch. Worse followed when the new Covent Garden was opened a year later, on September 18, 1809. To build it, a public subscription had been launched, headed by the King and the Duke of York, and the Duke of Northumberland—one of Kemble's admirers—contributed £19,000. Yet the cost of this vast theatre, built in the grandiose, pseudo-classical style of the time, was disproportionately high (about £300,000) and the proprietors decided to pass some of the cost on to the consumers. A week before the gala opening they announced that the prices would be raised from six to seven shillings for the boxes and from three-and-six to four shillings for the pit. It also became known that twenty-six private boxes had been built, at the expense of the galleries, and that the famous soprano, Madame Catalani, was engaged to sing at £50 a night. The result was an extraordinary explosion of popular anger, known as the O.P. or Old Price Riots, directed against the management for daring to put up the prices in order to subsidise a foreign opera singer and promote upper class immorality (for the private boxes were regarded by pit and gallery as arbours of aristocratic vice).

On the first night of the season, when John Philip Kemble stepped proudly out on the stage of his new theatre for the first time, he was greeted with a tempest of hissing, shouting and whistling that drowned his prologue. The 'torrent of execration' continued throughout *Macbeth*, with continual yelling of 'Old Prices' and 'No Catalani', and Mrs. Siddons and her brother were shouted down with particular violence. Most of the women in the private

boxes left early in the evening, to escape the insults chanted by the pit, but the theatre was still crammed with rioters, who stood in shouting ranks with their hats on, and their backs to the stage. The actors went doggedly on through the tragedy and the musical farce which followed it, but scarcely a word could be heard for the noise. When the programme was over, and the audience refused to move, Kemble made the first of many mistakes: he sent for the police. The sight of two constables walking on to the stage roused the rioters to wild frenzy, and their temper grew even more ferocious when—after the constable's tactful withdrawal to Bow Street—fire engines were brought forward to threaten the house. It was not until two o'clock in the morning that the theatre at last began to clear, after a good-humoured chorus of 'God Save the King.'

That was only the beginning. Every night, week after week, the well organised riots continued. No damage was done to the theatre, and none of the company suffered any physical violence, but from the second night onwards the audience paraded banners and placards with increasingly abusive slogans; they danced the 'O.P. dance', stamping rhythmically up and down as they chanted; they wore O.P. hats and O.P. brooches; and all the while they kept up an unearthly din with horns, gongs, bells, rattles, whistles and their own stentorian howling, as the unfortunate actors went through their repertoire in dumb show at high speed. Most of the press, including *The Times*, was on the rioters' side, and ballads, broadsheets and caricatures appeared in profusion. Kemble was, not surprisingly, the main target. He ordered the trap doors on the stage to be opened as a defence against the audience, and hired professional bruisers—including several Jews—

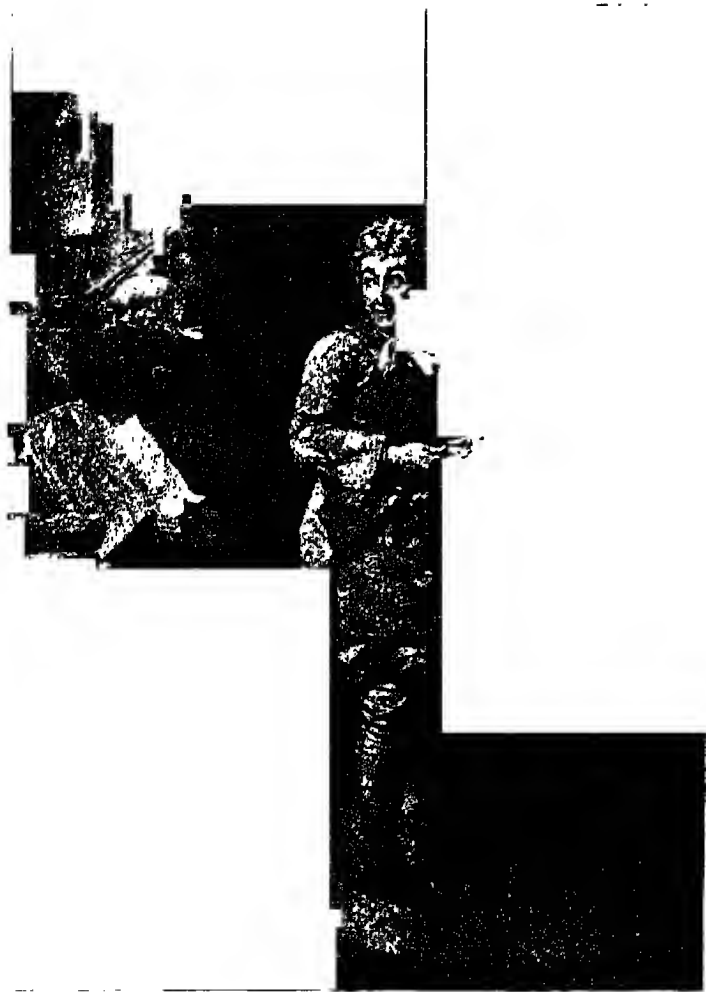
to attack the demonstrators—actions which whipped up public hatred of him to boiling point. When the theatre's accounts were inspected by an independent committee, which approved the proposed increase in prices, the crowd's fury was unabated: Kemble was then charged with corruption and profiteering, as well as brutal tyranny and oppression. Every discreditable incident in his life that could be discovered (or invented) was used by the O.P.-ites in a vicious campaign against the great tragedian. Towards the end of this astonishing affair threatening mobs often gathered outside his house in Great Russell Street. His windows were smashed, and his wife had ladders at the ready, in case their home was taken by storm. He was, for a time, the most hated man in town.

The rights and wrongs of the O.P. riots are, like its causes, complex; but it is plain that the violence of this anti-Kemble feeling was due to more than the rioters' immediate grievance against the Covent Garden management. Never deeply loved by the audience, Kemble had been deeply feared and respected; but the respect turned into resentment of his autocratic self-sufficiency, his insulation and rigidity. He was attacked as a principle of authority. Londoners saw him as a Coriolanus of the stage, icily contemptuous of those he was supposed to serve, and they were determined to humiliate the pride of this 'upstart' player. In the end, of course, they had their way. After three months of rioting, Kemble was obliged to accept the O.P. terms and to make a public apology from the stage. When, at the beginning of the next season, he foolishly tried to break his promise by maintaining half the private boxes, the riots began all over again. This time

he had learned his lesson: at the first crack of the whip the theatre closed and the necessary changes were made. There was no doubt now about whom was the master.

When peace was at last concluded, Kemble enjoyed an Indian summer of public favour at Covent Garden. Cooke had gone to America, Mrs. Siddons retired, and he was alone in the field. Yet the applause of these crowded houses did not reconcile the proud actor to his humiliation. 'My lord,' he said to Lord Mountjoy, 'Christ was crucified, De Wet was assassinated: so much for the world and its people.' He was an embittered and ailing man, whose powers were in decline and whose dreams of independent management had evaporated. Asthma and gout (and a quarrel with Thomas Harris) soon drove him from the theatre. After a leisurely and lucrative absence of nearly two years he returned in the winter of 1813, and once again drew the crowds to his *Cato* and *Coriolanus*; but the final disappointment came a few weeks later, in January, with the sensational success at Drury Lane of Edmund Kean—who was hailed at once on all sides as the greatest actor of the age, with what seemed a revolutionary style of playing. 'We wish we had never seen Mr. Kean,' wrote Hazlitt. 'He has destroyed the Kemble religion; and it was the religion in which we were brought up.'

Kemble knew that his reign was over, and he made his plans accordingly. After preparing an eight-volume edition of the classic drama, as staged under his management, he embarked on his final season in the winter of 1816; and he made his farewell performance as *Coriolanus* on June 23, 1817. Having sold his library and his wardrobe, he set off abroad—to Paris, Toulouse and at last to Lausanne, where he died on February 26, 1823.



DAVID GARRICK
As Abel Drugger in *The Alchemist*, 1769
After the painting by Zoffany



JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE

As Cato in Joseph Addison's play

Engraved from a painting by Richard Westall, 1791

Although all attempts to codify the arts and crafts of acting are ultimately doomed to failure, one serviceable key to the looking-glass world may be found in the distinction between the 'personality' and the 'character' actor, expressed by Louis Jouvet in the terms *acteur* and *comédien*. Broadly speaking, the *comédien* is a Protean player who sinks his personality in the part, creating new selves from role to role; whereas the *acteur* sinks the part in his personality, allowing each new role to irradiate another aspect of his unchanging ego. This is the difference between Garrick and Kemble, as it was between Garrick and Quin. Kemble's effective range of parts was narrow; he lacked plasticity and flexibility; his long face, Roman nose, and jutting chin, his stately walk, dignified carriage and slow delivery, were always uncompromisingly unconcealed.

That is one reason why audiences grew tired of his long dominion, and why his acting has been more rigorously analysed than that of any comparable figure in the English theatre. *Acteurs* are always more vulnerable to criticism than are *comédiens*, for their continuous, public personality seems to be under fire: if their mannerisms and mistakes are more obvious, their triumphs are likely to be underrated. Kemble's weaknesses, moreover, were highlighted by the contrast of Kean's romantic style, and it is his misfortune that there were no Hazlitts or Hunts to record his earlier triumphs. It is the Kemble of late middle age, when his style was fossilised by success, that survives in the essays from which people take their opinion of his acting. Getting the right kind of memorial, as I have observed elsewhere, is a matter of chance in the theatre, and here—as in many other things—Kemble was unlucky. He was a classicist marooned among the romantics, an

aristocrat in a democratic culture, and the best writers were in the opposition camp.

Yet, all such considerations aside, it is clear that John Philip Kemble had serious limitations. His face could express only a small compass of intense emotions, his eyes lacked the mesmeric lustre of a Kean or Garrick, and the look of patrician dignity which he brought to many of his roles seemed, at times, like 'a man who is just going to sneeze.' In action, he was consistently statuesque, and was known to introduce a Turveydrop passion for Deportment into the most incongruous situations: he played Hamlet, according to Hazlitt, like a man in armour. At his worst, to quote Leigh Hunt, 'it was not the man, but his mask; a trophy, a consul's robe; or, if you please, a rhetorician;' and Mrs. Siddons complained that even in his most 'impetuous bursts,' her brother was 'always careful to avoid any discomposure of his dress or deportment.' 'In every part,' said William Robson proudly, 'he was a *gentleman*.'

Kemble suffered throughout his life from asthma and a cough which became 'almost habitual', and he therefore had to discipline his voice (and his audience) into a slow and elaborately careful delivery. He paced through the blank verse of his favourite roles with measured stride and prolonged pause, 'enunciating every letter in every word,' as Macready put it. But his voice lacked range, volume and melody: Macready called it 'husky and untuneable', at the end of his career, and in the year of his retirement Ludwig Tieck described it as 'weak and tremulous, though full of expression, and every word is sounded with knowledge and feeling, only with too much emphasis: between every second and third word a significant pause is made,

and most lines end on a higher pitch.' Tieck found this declamation 'a real hindrance to genuine acting, in fact (it) made it almost impossible.' That is why Kemble's most bitter critic, Leigh Hunt, could dismiss him as 'a teacher of elocution rather than an actor and not a good teacher, on that account.'

His pronunciation, too, was pedantically eccentric. In the teeth of public ridicule, he obstinately insisted on his own extraordinary variants: 'beard' became 'bird', 'rode' was 'rod', 'virtue' was 'vartue', 'earth' became 'airth', and—most notorious Kemble-ism of all—'aches' was pronounced as 'aitches.' Unwaveringly confident in his own scholarship, Kemble ignored the critics and the audience. Charles Mathews met him backstage one night, while the audience was still hissing his pronunciation, and Kemble imperturbably took a pinch of snuff and sniffed, 'Umph! how those good people think they're right.' This innovation was part of what Hunt called his 'laborious and almost universal preciseness':

He strives by niceties to strike the mind;
For meaning too precise, inclin'd to pore,
And labour for a point unknown before;
Untimely playing thus the critic's part,
To gain the head when he should smite the heart.

Smiting the heart was not, however, Kemble's forte. He awed, but he did not kindle. He impressed, but he did not overwhelm. Even in his best roles he seemed, at times, to be keeping his distance from the character and the audience; 'he sacrifices too much to decorum,' said Hazlitt; and it was the weakness of his method that when he was below par, or when he was not trying, the effort

and calculation should seem most conspicuous. At the end of his life, Macready believed, 'in all he did the study was apparent.'

Stiff, pompous, stern, each haggard feature groom'd:
Each step predestin'd, and each look foredoom'd:
Precise in passion, cautious ev'n in rage,
Lo! Kemble comes, the Euclid of the stage:
Who moves in given angles, squares a start,
And blows his Roman beak by rules of art.

And so the evidence against Kemble accumulates. If that were all, then he would scarcely merit a place among the great actors of our stage; but if that were all, then he could not have commanded the London theatre for over thirty years, nor enjoyed the friendship and respect of so many members of the Georgian social and cultural elite, nor established a 'school' of acting which dominated the stage for many years after his retirement, nor survived in print with such abundant, complex and controversial vitality. He has, indeed, been judged too narrowly by the standards of naturalism, an approach to acting which he despised. He is condemned for failing to provide something which he deplored as vulgar—'nature.' His talent was for the 'supernatural,' in the phrase of Byron—who called Kemble 'the most supernatural of actors'—and he exercised it on the outsize heroes and villains of the classic and pseudo-classic drama. 'Give him only the *man* to play, why, he is nothing,' said Hazlitt. 'Give him the paraphernalia of greatness, and he is great.'

Kemble's art was deliberately stylised, declamatory and sculptural; it belonged to an age of oratory, an age which worshipped the 'classical' ideals of harmony, proportion,

repose and order; but it was exhibited in an age in love with the Gothic and Romantic, in huge theatres dedicated to pantomime and spectacle. Yet his acting was, in a sense, the product of an architecture: it was meant to be seen at a distance. This was, as his biographer Herschel Baker says, 'a style of long, sweeping lines and detached, almost impersonal grandeur. It was a histrionic counterpart of what Sir Joshua Reynolds demanded in painting: a marmoreal loftiness and zealous avoidance of the minute, the particular, the personal.' His performances were, said one admiring witness, 'ANIMATED PAINTINGS.' This is how John Ambrose Williams describes Kemble's appearance as Coriolanus (in a scarlet robe, with built-up heels on his sandals):

In his first encounter with the rabble, it is impossible not to admire the noble proportions and majestic *contour* of his figure; the expression of his face, naturally of the Roman character; his right arm erected in conscious authority; his chest thrown forward, and his head slightly back; his right leg fearlessly advanced, and firmness in all his attitude, together with the exact adjustment and tasteful folds of the classical drapery with which his person is invested, compose a most superb and commanding *tout ensemble* of the human form.

With less enthusiasm, Hazlitt explains the success of Kemble's Cato: 'There was nothing for him to do in this character, but to appear in it. It had all the dignity of still-life. It was a studied piece of classical costume—a conscious exhibition of elegantly disposed drapery—that was all: yet, as a mere display of personal and artificial grace, it was inimitable.'

Yet there was more than a tasteful disposition of drapery in this performance, which was—with Coriolanus—the most popular in Kemble's repertoire. There was also, another critic noted, 'a regular and magnificent declamation, supported throughout with majesty, and occasionally varied with the energy of a simple passion. In this style of speaking and acting Mr. Kemble is without an equal or a rival.' Oratory and sculpture were here combined, in a carefully designed series of effects; projected with theatrical expertise, keen intelligence and studied intensity. Kemble was indeed a master of the grand style, in spite of his eccentricities of voice and manner. He had the physical advantages of a strong and handsome face, a head of heroic cast, a dignified carriage, and a royal authority: Hazlitt described him as 'the only one of the moderns who both in figure and action approaches the beauty and grandeur of the antique,' and Macready wrote of his Cato that 'in face and form he realised the most perfect ideal that ever enriched the sculptor's or painter's fancy. . . .'

Kemble's range was small indeed, but within it he was incomparable. Lacking flexibility, he was at his best—as Hazlitt said—in 'the development of some one solitary sentiment or exclusive passion . . . where all the passions move round a central point, and are governed by one master-key, he stood unrivalled'—as in Penruddock, Cato, the Stranger and Coriolanus. Both Hunt and Hazlitt, enemies of the Kemble school, thought Penruddock 'perfect.' Yet in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* (the best Hazlitt saw) Kemble also scored great triumphs in his prime, and although he was obliged to act in lesser plays he was content with nothing less than masterpieces. For all his

dignity, he could move the audience to tears. 'The distinguishing excellence of his acting,' Hazlitt wrote, 'may be summed up in one word—*intensity*; in the seizing upon some one feeling or idea, in working it up, with a certain graceful consistency, and conscious grandeur of conception, to a very high degree of pathos or sublimity.'

The aesthetic ideal which Kemble served may seem, today, a false one, yet his achievements in its service should be recognised, not only as manager but as actor. He created a 'classic' style out of nowhere, improvising a tradition in a vacuum, trying to establish—almost single-handed—a *Comédie Anglaise* which would be honoured as a temple of the drama. To perfect himself as the high priest of that temple, he subjected himself throughout his acting career to a painstaking course of discipline and study. Handicapped by asthma, he nevertheless made the best of a weak voice, so that even Hunt admitted he had 'done wonders' with it. Boaden records that he seemed 'always to consider the work as still *to do*. . . . To the last of him, Hamlet and Macbeth had still, as he conceived, calls upon him for improvement.' He was never too famous or too successful to stop learning. At the end of his life, he lamented that 'I am only just beginning thoroughly to understand my art.' Hazlitt called him 'the only great and truly impressive actor I remember, who rose to his stately height by the interposition of art and gradations of merit.'

Kemble's greatness is not the result of luck or instinct. He *made* himself into a great player; he was, as John Taylor said, 'a manufactured actor.' He was not afraid to think about his art, to analyse technique, to impose his style upon the public. This was no easy victory, but—as

Herschel Baker says—'he had brought to his art a preparation and a care that had at first bewildered and then enchanted his audiences. Without possessing his sister's genius, he had a talent which in its own kind has never been surpassed.'

III

EDMUND KEAN

ON a foggy, snowy night in January, when the cobbled streets of Regency London were thick with slush, few playgoers could be expected to desert their firesides just to see the debut of a man from Exeter at Drury Lane. Preliminary puffs in the press had, it is true, compared this Mr. Kean with Garrick, but Londoners had seen the failure of too many provincial recruits, advertised in advance with equal extravagance, to put any faith in such inspired rumours. Despite its brand-new architecture (it had been rebuilt in 1812) both the business and prestige of Drury Lane were at their nadir. Talent scouts had been sent out in all directions to unearth some new tragedian who could compete with Kemble at Covent Garden, and exhibiting this unknown from the West Country clearly seemed to be another bid by the committee in charge of the theatre to recoup its fortunes. So on the night of January 26, 1814, the vast, cold, ornate playhouse was barely a quarter full. Before the curtain rose on *The Merchant of Venice*, a wintry depression had settled over both auditorium and stage. Resigned to the prospect of another fiasco, for this shabby little provincial had behaved very oddly at the play's one rehearsal at noon, the company moved apathetically through the opening scene. Then it happened. 'There came on a small man, with an Italian face and fatal eyes, which struck all.'

He stopped, leaned on his stick, rested his eyes on Antonio. The pall lifted. The house stirred. Then he spoke. 'Three thousand ducats—well?' he said to Bassanio grimly, and an electric current flashed through the audience. Almost at once, in that first scene, he established his mastery over the house. The man from Exeter wore a black gaberdine, a black beard and a black wig; yet it was his black eyes, piercing and mesmeric, which riveted attention to the Jew. Here, it was quickly recognised, was not only a new face but a new Shylock. Smouldering with scorn, chuckling with grim humour, he was also—as a critic said in later years—'a chapter of Genesis.'

Hath a *dog* money? It is possible

A *cur* can lend three thousand ducats . . .

he asked with fierce emphasis, and the house was surprised into clapping. Excitement grew as the play went on, and the actor's range was revealed. The lines seemed to be his own. His face was a language, and his body spoke, too. Nobody on the English stage in 1814 could use his arms and hands like that; no living actor was so eloquent in silence; nobody could act with such burning, kindling force. Astonished by the transformation, the other players cringed under the onslaught, backing away from the fury in his voice and eyes. It was the Tubal scene which confirmed his success. 'No passage in the range of tragedy,' says Kean's biographer, H. N. Hillebrand, 'lay more securely in the fortress of his powers. The volcanic intensity of feeling, the broken utterances, the sudden passages from grief to exultation as Shylock learns alternately of Jessica's squandering ducats in Genoa and Antonio's ships lost at sea, were Kean's histrionic speci-

ality, in which, perhaps, he excelled over any other English actor.'

As the temperature and the noise increased, actors came out from dressing-rooms and green-rooms to see what was happening: 'how the devil so few of them kicked up such a row was something marvellous,' said one of the players backstage that night. People came hurrying away from Covent Garden to see if the rumours were true. In the trial scene Kean rounded off his victory, before an audience now on its toes with excitement, with his bitter gloating over:

I cannot find it: 'tis not in the bond.

George Frederick Cooke, the outstanding Shylock of recent years, used to give this, so a critic noted—'with a savage sneer; Mr. Kean gave it with a transported chuckle; his inmost heart seemed to laugh that no obstacle now remained to the completion of his murderous purpose. . . .' And this Shylock was defiant to the end, going off the stage with one last malignant glare at Gratiano, while the theatre rang with shouts of acclamation. After so many disastrously bad nights, Drury Lane had found a saviour; after the statuesque grandeur of the Kemble school, this kind of acting was a revelation. As Shylock came off, the manager and the leading actors, who had hitherto snubbed him with cold civility, waited to welcome him with open arms. He pushed past them to the dressing-room which he shared with several others, changed rapidly into his clothes, and hurried back to his lodgings on the other side of the Strand. His long-suffering wife was waiting for news, when Kean burst in through the door. 'Mary,' he cried in triumph, 'you shall ride in your carriage and Charley shall go to Eton.' Both promises came true.

While the Keans were celebrating over their supper, the dramatic critic of the *Morning Chronicle*, in a room not far away, was writing his notice of the performance. 'For voice, eye, action and expression,' wrote William Hazlitt, 'no actor has come out for many years at all equal to him. The applause, from the first scene to the last, was general, loud and uninterrupted. Indeed, the very first scene . . . showed the master in his art, and at once decided the opinion of the audience.' In the following week, when Kean repeated his Shylock, Hazlitt went further: 'His style of acting is, if we may use the expression, more significant, more pregnant of meaning, more varied and alive in every part, than any we have almost ever witnessed. . . . It is not saying too much of him, though it is saying a great deal, that he has all that Mr. Kemble *wants* of perfection. He reminds us of the descriptions of the "far-darting eye" of Garrick.' This powerful support helped to draw bigger audiences to Drury Lane, but Kean was still ignored by many papers. Apart from Hazlitt, only one other critic saw the first night. It was not until some two weeks later, after his performance in *Richard III*, that Kean conquered the town. On the night of February 6, he was watched by a large audience which included the 'taste-making' elite. They were ready for anything, and they were not disappointed.

In the words of H. N. Hillebrand, reconstructing the impact of Kean's Crookback, 'the performance was from the first soliloquy to the death a triumph keyed to the pitch of trumpets and hosannas. The little tragedian was in everything he did prodigious. He was the master virtuoso who swept through the gamut of moods, throwing his hearers, with each change, into new ecstasies . . . here

were the thunder and the lightning, here were storms and bursts of sunlight, here were the colours of the rainbow and the terrible shadows of crime and death, here in a word was nature in all her enchanting variety.' Like Garrick, he was at his best in the courtship of Anne and the death-scene. 'He fought like one drunk with wounds,' Hazlitt noted, 'and the attitude in which he stands with his hands stretched out, after his sword is taken from him, had a preternatural and terrific grandeur, as if his will could not be disarmed, and the very phantoms of his despair had a withering power.' There he stood, looking at Richmond (so Leigh Hunt said), 'as if he was already a disembodied spirit, searching him with the eyes of another world; or, as if he silently cursed him with some new scorn, to which death and its dreadful knowledge had given him a right.'

This performance, added to his Shylock, made Kean the talk of the town. He followed it, in this same remarkable season of 1813-14, with his Hamlet, Othello and Iago. In each of them he won homage, and open war broke out between his supporters and the champions of John Philip Kemble.

The immediate recognition of Edmund Kean at Drury Lane in 1814, in triumphant opposition to the current school of acting, at once recalls the night at Goodman's Fields in 1741 when David Garrick made his debut. Both were twenty-four; both were unknown; both were small in stature; both were hailed for their 'natural' style. Yet their lives, both before and after these initial victories, were sharply different, and the difference is reflected in their art. Mystery surrounds the birth, parentage and

childhood of Edmund Kean, a mystery which his own love of tall stories helped to thicken (he liked to suggest, for instance, that he was a duke's bastard, an Old Etonian, and an erstwhile cabin boy.) Was he born in 1787, 1789, or 1790? Was he the son of Aaron, Edmund or Moses Kean, or of the Duke of Norfolk? Was his mother Nancy Carey or Charlotte Tidswell? Who brought him up? Was he trained at Drury Lane? When did he start acting? Nobody can be certain: all that is certain is that Kean's childhood was wild, harsh and nomadic, marked by poverty, privation, and a precocious acquaintance with the more brutal facts of life in Georgian London. He never had a settled home for long. His education was scanty and irregular. It seems most likely, according to the evidence in Mr. Giles Playfair's biography, that he was born in 1790, the illegitimate child of Nancy Carey and Edmund Kean. His father was a drunkard, who went mad and committed suicide in his early twenties (when Edmund was three): like his famous brother, Moses Kean, and his mistress's father, George Saville Carey, he was an orator and a mimic, and enjoyed some popularity at concerts and recitals on the fringe of the professional theatre. Nancy Carey was an obscure and apparently disreputable actress, who scraped a living as a street hawker when she could find no work with strollers or in the London fairs and pleasure gardens. She seems to have had scant affection for Edmund, farming him out for long periods to other women, and he bore her no love or respect. (Her grandfather Henry Carey, best known as author of *Sally in our Alley*, also committed suicide.) Although the boy took his mother's name, and probably spent a good deal of his childhood with her on the road, earning a few

pence in barns, taverns and fairs, it was the Kean family which showed him most affection. He was looked after by the Keans' widowed sister, Mrs. Price, who lived near Leicester Square, and by Moses Kean's mistress, Charlotte Tidswell, an obscure actress in the company at Drury Lane, where she worked for nearly forty years. Perhaps, as many writers suppose, Miss Tidswell paid for his theatrical training; he may have been taught singing by Incledon and fencing by Angelo, the masters of their crafts; and he may have made occasional appearances on the Drury Lane stage, although there is no evidence that he was ever in the company or attracted any notice. (His name appears on no surviving bills, although these include the names of many other obscure infant troupers.) Yet, like most other children born into the theatre of the time and unlike any other of our great actors, he was already an experienced performer before he was ten. Edmund Carey learned not only how to stand and deliver in the tragedian's style, but also how to sing, dance, do imitations, walk a rope, ride a horse, do somersaults and other acrobatic tricks. In 1801, he was billed at a minor theatre as 'the Celebrated Theatrical Child'; in 1802—at the age of twelve—he appeared as 'the celebrated Master Carey' at Covent Garden in a short programme of recitations. As an infant prodigy, he was clearly something of a success, and this made it all the harder for his proud, ambitious nature to endure waiting for recognition in manhood.

Kean's first *recorded* provincial engagement was in 1804, when he joined the stock company in Sheerness, 'still in boy's costume,' and played a number of leading roles. From then onwards his course may intermittently be traced around the British Isles, from circuit to circuit,

through a cloud of legend. He acted in Belfast; Maidstone, Canterbury, Tunbridge Wells, Rochester, Margate, Faversham and Deal; Gloucester and Stroud; Cheltenham (where he met and married Mary Chambers in 1808), Walsall, Lichfield and Birmingham; Swansea (where a son, Howard Anthony, was born in 1809), Carmarthen, Haverfordwest, and Waterford (where a second son, John Charles, was born in 1811); Edinburgh; York; Weymouth, Exeter, Totnes, Guernsey; Barnstaple and Dorchester, where he was engaged by Drury Lane (and where Howard died); and, in all probability, many other towns as well. He even appeared in London, in the Haymarket summer season of 1806, but his performances in such minor roles as Rosencrantz attracted no attention and he disappeared into the provinces again. During these nine years in the provinces (which may well have been preceded by several more), Kean acted in tragedy, pantomime and farce, in melodrama, comedy and ballet; he sang, danced, gave recitations, helped with the stage management. He also made time to continue his self-education, learning scraps of Latin, writing out comments on Shakespeare, learning bits of history and geography. In Shakespeare he played obscurely as Lennox, Gratiano and the rest, but Shakespeare occupied a relatively small place in the repertoire of these companies. Kean learned his trade in a host of long-buried dramas and after-pieces. His main 'serious' leading roles were Lord Hastings in Rowe's *Jane Shore* and Octavian in Colman's *The Mountaineers*; on the lighter side he was a popular Harlequin and Chimpanzee (a miming role in *La Perouse* which gave the actor in a monkey skin scope for some crude humour, acrobatics, and pathos in the death-scene). It was not until he reached the Exeter

circuit, at the probable age of twenty-two, that he began to tackle Shylock, Richard, and Macbeth. By that time his salary had advanced, in eight years, from fifteen shillings to twenty-five shillings a week.

Like all actors on the provincial circuits, Kean suffered humiliation, hunger, frustration and hardship during these years; yet he felt them with special misery and resentment. Proud, lonely, vulnerable, envious and consumingly ambitious, he could not rest content with what, by Georgian standards, was a moderate success. Many of his misfortunes were brought on by his own pride, in quarrelling with managers over his pay or his status. It was not the poverty which irked Kean: he was inured to that. It was the humiliation of his daemon. Something of his fiery spirit is shown in the story of his return to Sheerness in 1807, when he opened in the title-role of *Alexander the Great*. An officer in one of the stage boxes, in the way of Georgian gentlemen at the play, amused himself by continually interrupting the young actor. 'Alexander the little! Alexander the little!' he called mockingly, till Kean could tolerate it no longer. Folding his arms, he walked over to the box, fixed the officer with a ferocious stare, and declaimed vehemently: 'Yes—with a *great soul!*' Again, in Stroud the manager engaged Master Betty, the Young Roscius, to play Norval and Hamlet; Kean was billed to play Glenalvon and Laertes; but Kean was not there on the night. When Betty had gone, he returned, limping and hungry, but still in a rage. 'I've had nothing to eat but turnips and cabbages, but I'll go again, before I play such characters,' he told the company. 'I won't play second to any man—except John Kemble.' That is the story, and whether it is literally true or not, it is certainly

in character. He despised the men and women he acted with. He believed implacably in his own genius. And when he seemed alone in that belief, he relieved his black melancholia by bouts of drinking. His marriage soon proved to be a failure, and his wife's life was made a misery: 'could he have endured a little longer,' she wrote to a friend, 'Fortune might have rewarded his very great abilities. To forget sorrow he first took to Drinking—every dissipation follow'd of course. His Nights were spent with a Set of wretches a Disgrace to Human nature. One step led to another, till ruin, inevitable ruin, was the end.' That was in September, 1813, a few weeks before those 'very great abilities' were rewarded at the great age of twenty-three! Yet Kean's health and character were, indeed, already ruined by his debauches, not so much because of premature disappointment in his career but rather by the self-destructive fever raging in his blood, inflamed by his own blazing megalomania and his deep feeling of social inferiority. He could never come to terms with society, even in his own world of the theatre; and his greatest successes on the stage were as a public enemy defying the conventions, 'the man they loved to hate.'

While playing at Barnstaple, he agreed in despair—having given up hope of being engaged by either of the 'patent houses'—to join the company of the theatre in Wych Street, not far from Drury Lane, which was then run by R. W. Elliston. As this was a 'minor' theatre, where legitimate drama was forbidden, it was unlikely that he would now ever go to Drury Lane or Covent Garden. A month later at Dorchester he was suddenly offered a contract by Samuel Arnold, the manager of Drury Lane, Kean accepted, but did not disclose his prior commitment.

When Elliston protested about such conduct and refused to surrender his rights in the actor, Kean was treated with cold disdain by the Lane's committee. They refused to let him act at Drury Lane or anywhere else until Elliston released him, and he was plunged once again into despair and poverty. Agreement was reached at last, however, and the committee—having taught the offender a lesson and exhausted other expedients—reluctantly allowed Kean to play.

On Kean's nights, in that first triumphant season, Drury Lane was packed to the doors, and people fought for a place. In March his salary was doubled, and after *Hamlet* it was raised to £20 a week; the committee gave him a cheque for £500, and other gifts were showered upon him by aristocratic admirers; his humble lodgings in Cecil Street became a place of pilgrimage; he was patronised, lionised, adored. By October he had earned over £4,000. Among his admirers was David Garrick's widow, who praised the resemblance of his Crookback to the performance of her great husband, and gave him some of the properties Garrick had used (which Kean accepted) together with some good advice (which Kean could accept from nobody). To be publicly honoured as Garrick's heir gave Kean especial pleasure. Yet unlike Garrick, he did not know how to cope with this social triumph. He did his best for a time to live up to the demands of his wife and the expectations of his noble patrons, struggling with small talk and the genteel niceties, keeping up appearances. But he was too bitterly conscious of his lack of 'family' and education, too uninterested in anything but the stage, drink, and his own career, ever to be at ease in a salon or at the dining-table. His very success whetted his sense of

isolation and resentment, his inability to tolerate competition or criticism, and he suffered agonies of humiliation from the Kembles' personal attacks upon his lack of inches and graces, his ignorance and vulgarity. Put on the defensive in this strange new world, Kean soon gave up the fight to be, offstage, a second Garrick. Unable to conform, compromise and flatter, he went to the other extreme. Ostentatiously rebellious, he boasted of his pet lion, his black horses, and his hard-drinking Wolf Club; he fought boxing-matches in the parlour of his new house in Clarges Street; but found his pleasure, more often, in pothouses. Already in 1816 he missed a performance because, it was thought, of a drunken orgy in Deptford: whatever the cause of that absence, it was to be followed in later years by many, many more for which the reasons were only too obvious. As Kean lost self-control he more frequently appeared on the stage quite drunk.

In that first season of 1813-14, moreover, Kean was already—at the age of twenty-three—marked by privations, excesses and overwork. He embarked on his career not, like Garrick, in the full vigour of young manhood, but with a constitution already weakened. After each of the big Shakespearean roles, it was noticed, he was utterly exhausted. He spat blood after his first performance of Crookback at Drury Lane. Yet that fierce, self-destructive will drove him on after the performance from tavern to tavern, never resting or relaxing, burning up his energy, his strength, his authority. Partly because of this way of life, perhaps, he lacked—as Mr. Hildebrand says—staying-power. He showed London the best cards up his sleeve in his first season. In his second season box-office receipts were already dropping well below the 1814 level, and

within a few years he often played to half-empty houses. In the provinces his popularity was much more constant than in London, and it was in the provinces that he made most of his money—for over sixteen years he earned, it is estimated, at the rate of £10,000 a year (worth perhaps seven or eight times as much today). Till the end of his life, moreover, he kept his place as leader of the stage—or, at any rate, as its first player. What he did, at his best, he did supremely and uniquely well. But nevertheless, compared with Garrick or with Kemble, he lost the audience's active allegiance in a remarkably short space of time.

If Kean had enjoyed, like Garrick, unrestricted power over Drury Lane, would it all have been different? Perhaps. Certainly the committee's rule was, while it lasted, deplorably weak and inefficient (as is the way of committees in the arts), and a shrewd manager with a free hand might have presented Kean with a stronger company in better plays. Yet Kean's word was, in effect, law at the Lane for several years, and he had far more power than Kemble ever enjoyed under Sheridan. He could get the committee, however much they disliked him as a man, to give him what he wanted as an actor. But what he wanted was to shine alone. He would not tolerate any talent of distracting magnitude beside him on the stage, and his taste in choosing plays and actors was usually bad. He seemed to have no clear idea of his own limits or powers, for he failed in role after role of his own selection with resounding flops, yet he would brook no interference or advice. Devoid of self-criticism and humility, he went his own road to perdition. When he had a chance to take the lease of Drury Lane in 1819, with the complete collapse of

the committee system, he ruined it by his arrogance; the shareholders preferred to deal with Elliston, a lesser actor but a better manager, endowed—for all his grandiose airs—with tact and common sense and capital. Kean at once announced that he could never work for such a man. He would go to America. But he soon had to reconcile himself to the painful necessity of remaining at Drury Lane, for Elliston politely threatened him with a possible claim of up to £10,000 in damages if he broke his contract. This was, for Kean, yet another unkind cut by Fate: in the turbulent drama he made of his own life, he was always the innocent victim of injustice and treachery.

Elliston allowed Kean to visit America in the following year. At first he made a triumphal progress, until he arrived in Boston. Enthusiasm here was tepid, and on the third night Kean refused to play because there were not enough customers in the house. The entire American press fell upon him with hysterical savagery and his sudden unpopularity was exaggerated by the sneering tone of his 'apology' (Kean was never at his best in letters to the press, or indeed in his relations with the public). When he returned in disgrace to London in 1821, announcing to Elliston that he was 'full of health and ambition', he was given a spectacular welcome—but broke down after a few nights, and took several weeks to recuperate. It was a poor season, in which Kean failed with six new parts. For the season of 1822-3 Elliston shrewdly engaged Charles Mayne Young, a tragedian of the Kemble school, who had hitherto been the mainstay of Covent Garden. Kean protested fiercely that he would leave England rather than act with Young. 'The Throne is mine—no man, in this profession, can rob me of the character of the first English

Actor.' Yet the contrast of styles, as Elliston foresaw, revived interest in the other tragedian and confirmed his supremacy. In the next season Macready replaced Young, and Kean's indignation deepened when Elliston planned to put them together on the stage. Once again (in May, 1824) he spoke of leaving England for America.

It was not Macready who was the danger, however: in the spring of 1824 the press began to refer glancingly to incidents in Kean's private life which were within a few months to bring his world down in ruins. The storm burst in January, 1825, when Robert Cox, a London alderman and member of the Drury Lane committee, sued his friend Edmund Kean for 'criminal conversation' with Mrs. Cox. The defence pleaded the husband's complicity, in an affair of at least seven years standing, and brought up enough evidence to strip Cox of public sympathy and cut his claim of £2,000 to an award of £800. But Kean was in the pillory, the laughing-stock of England; his love letters were read aloud and broadcast in the press; ballads and prints kept his disgrace alive; and *The Times*, which devoted half an issue to reporting the case, pursued him with particular virulence, virtually encouraging audiences to riot against 'that obscene little personage.' What exacerbated the public fury was that Kean acted at Drury Lane a few days after the trial. He had no thought of postponement: 'I am prepared for war,' he is reported to have told Elliston—and he stood his ground bravely in a battle royal which lasted for several nights of continuous uproar. He quickly reasserted his authority in London, on the stage at least, but angry demonstrations broke out again during his provincial tour that summer and again in America, to which he rashly returned in the winter. ~~It~~

was not so much the fact of adultery which shocked the two nations, nor was this by any means altogether a fit of hypocritical hysteria: behind the outburst against Kean lay a long accumulation of resentments, among all classes. It is partly true, as Giles Playfair says, that 'they hated him—because he was not a gentleman and yet had refused to be humble. He had flaunted himself in the face of society. It was his real fault not to have outraged morality, but to have outraged caste.' (Sir Walter Scott called him 'a copper laced, twopenny tearmouth, rendered mad by conceit and success'). Yet he had also outraged the traditional codes of the audience, which were based on something more than mere snobbery, by his arrogance, his drunkenness, his breaches of faith.

On his return from America in January, 1827, Kean played Shylock with all his old flair. 'A rush so fearful, an audience so packed, a reconciliation so complete, acting so faultless and a dramatic enjoyment so exquisite, I have never experienced,' wrote Dr. Doran. Yet the recovery was short-lived. Kean was now estranged from wife and son, ostracised off the stage by most of his former patrons, and completely surrendered to a life of debauchery. His genius slid into decline, with occasional flares of greatness to light the way. 'His self-respect was gone to the last shred,' says Hillebrand, 'and with it whatever authority he had over himself.' Soon Kean discovered, one agonising evening at the Lane, that his memory had gone: he could learn no more new roles. But he went on acting, in London and the provinces, living on his past glories, frequently too ill or too drunk to play. Every now and then he would make his farewell to the stage, but in a month or two he was back, unsteadily, in harness. How else could he live? He

had earned a fortune in his long career of dissipation, and had never learned how to keep it. In 1832, Dr. Doran noted, 'Genius was not traceable in that bloated face; intellect was all but quenched in those once matchless eyes; and the power seemed gone, despite the will that would recall it.' At his estate in Bute, he lived out his fantasies of power. Over the gate were four busts, of Shakespeare, Massinger, Garrick and himself; the walls were papered with scenes from his successes; and sometimes he patrolled the grounds dressed as Richard or Sir Giles. Often he appeared, in the street or on the stage, in the costume of the Huron Indians, which he had brought back from America and of which—together with his Huron name, Alanienouidet—he was grotesquely proud. Blotched face painted with streaks of red and yellow, bloodshot eyes looking out from beneath a headdress of eagle's feathers, gold rings through his nose and ears, and a tomahawk in his belt, Kean lived out his favourite role to the end—as an enemy of society, ready to scalp all conspirators against his genius. The end came at last in 1833, during a performance of *Othello* at Covent Garden: ill and weak though he was, Kean endured until 'Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore', but then he collapsed with his arm round Iago (played by his son Charles), and was carried off the stage. He never returned. Several weeks later at his home in Richmond, on the morning of May 15, Edmund Kean died.

A few months after Kean's London debut, Hazlitt made a sharp attack on the Drury Lane management for its lack of enterprise. 'Why not bring him out at once in a variety of characters?' he demanded. 'It seems, by all we can find,

that versatility is, perhaps, Mr. Kean's greatest excellence. Why, then, not give him his range? Far from being versatile, however, Kean worked within narrow limits. The roll-call of his parts, old and new, is a long list of failures. Fired by emulation, he tried continually to surpass other actors in parts they had made their own. He failed in farce and comedy, when he challenged the memory of Garrick (Kiteley and Druggier) and Cooke (Sir Pertinax MacSycophant). He failed as a tragic victim (Orestes), a romantic lover (Romeo) and a noble Roman (Coriolanus). He failed to match Macready as Virginius, or Kemble as Penruddock, King John and Wolsey. Although he attempted scores of new roles after his first London season, he added only four of any size to his permanent repertoire during the next twenty-seven years. They were Macbeth, in November 1814; Sir Giles Overreach, in Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, in January 1816 (it almost equalled Richard in popularity); Brutus in December 1818 (not in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, but in *Brutus, or The Fall of Tarquin*, by John Howard Payne, the author of *Home, Sweet Home*); and King Lear, in April 1820. Unlike Garrick, whose reputation grew and whose range expanded during his thirty years of theatrical sovereignty, Kean never fully recaptured the glory of his first London season; and for the rest of his career he lived, in the main, upon his Richard, Shylock, Hamlet, Othello and Sir Giles. Other leading parts were such pasteboard devils as Bajazet, the bloodthirsty Tartar ('the fiery soul of barbarous revenge stung to madness') and Zanga, the avenging Moor ('the glowing energy of the untamed children of the sun.') His Hamlet, Macbeth and Richard III were all, it seems, strongly akin to his Crookback; he was

often irrelevantly violent, harsh and sardonic; 'we seldom entirely lose sight of his Richard.'

Hazlitt—although he was one of Kean's few admirers in comedy—wrote, as early as 1815, that: 'Mr. Kean's imagination appears not to have the principles of joy, or hope, or love in it. He seems chiefly sensible to pain, or to the passions that spring from it, and to the terrible energies of mind or body, which are necessary to grapple with, or to avert it. Even over the world of passion he holds but a divided sway: he either does not feel, or seldom expresses, deep, sustained, internal sentiment—there is no repose in his mind: no feeling seems to take full possession of it, that is not linked to action, and that does not goad him on to the phrenzy of despair. Or if he ever conveys the sublimer pathos of thought and feelings, it is after the storm of passion, to which he has been worked up, had subsided.' Within his range there were, moreover, many conspicuous faults. In its upper registers Kean's voice was, as both Genest and Hazlitt agree, 'very bad': he usually overstrained it, trying to fill the vast theatre, and frequently became inaudible. Even in 1814 his voice often sounded 'thick and hoarse, somewhat between an apoplexy and a cold,' screeching and croaking when he forced it in the heat of passion. Like Garrick he was somewhat handicapped by his height—he was nearly five feet seven; but he lacked Garrick's fluent physical grace, being round-shouldered and heavily built. 'His figure was not only diminutive but insignificant,' as one observer put it, 'his natural appearance . . . was mean,' so much so that offstage he seemed smaller than he really was, and his height has usually been put at five feet four. Deficient in dignity, he was unroyal, even in his best role: his kings and princes were un-

mistakeably plebeian, and his Hamlet—in particular—had little touch of either gentleman or scholar. More significant was his contempt for the text, especially in Shakespeare, for he misused even the corrupted versions of the plays. At his best in the ‘busy’ scenes, when there was something to *do*, he hurried over long speeches of descriptive and meditative verse, slurring the words and adding his own emendations as he went along: ‘he translated his characters with great freedom and ingenuity into a language of his own,’ said the idolatrous Hazlitt. Sometimes, as in a performance of Richard III in 1814, ‘he gave the energy of action alone. He merely gesticulated, or at best vociferated the part.’ He bent all his energies, through the burning glass of his genius, on a series of particular ‘points’, careless of what happened to the rest of the play, concentrating sometimes upon one single word. ‘The excellence of his acting is in proportion to the number of hits,’ Hazlitt wrote of his Richard III, ‘for he has not equal truth and purity of style.’ This method was most conspicuously unsuccessful in his Lear, for in spite of some ‘single hits’, it seems, he failed to comprehend the play. At his worst he made ‘every sentence an alternation of dead pauses and rapid transitions,’ with sudden drops and jumps in the voice, and his vocal mannerisms became more evident as he grew older. A Philadelphia critic in 1821 deplored his ‘sudden mechanical depression and quick, violent vicissitude of tones—the precipitate strain and extreme volubility immediately preceding or following long pauses. . . .’ If Kemble was too statuesque, Kean went to the other extreme in his physical restlessness, which his detractors spoke of as St. Vitus’s dance: ‘his hands,’ said the Philadelphia critic, quoted in Mr. Hillebrand’s bio-

graphy, 'are kept in unremitting and the most rapid, convulsive movement; seeking, as it were, a resting place in some part of his upper dress, and occasionally pressed together on the crown of his head.' He was, Hazlitt wrote, 'always on full stretch—never relaxed. . . . He is too often in the highest key of passion, too uniformly on the verge of extravagance, too constantly on the rack,' or as the Philadelphian phrased it, 'his excellencies are perpetually passing into extremes, or degenerating into defects.' When he played Romeo, one hostile critic complained of 'a rotatory movement of the hand, as if describing the revolution of a spinning jenny; multiplied slaps upon his forehead, and manual elevation of his fell of hair; repeated knocking upon his own breast and occasional rapping at the chests of others. . . .' Kean had his deliberate tricks, too: like many other stars, he 'upstaged' his colleagues, and always kept his face to the front; he was apt to prelude a sentence by 'a hesitation, or a sound as of a half-laugh like a cue for the applause of *claqueurs*'; and he had a way of 'going quickly off, then returning slowly but unexpectedly.'

Yet, in the words of G. H. Lewes: 'The greatest artist is he who is greatest in the highest reaches of his art, even although he may lack the qualities necessary for the adequate execution of some minor details. It is not by his faults, but by his excellences, that we measure a great man. . . . Thus estimated,' Lewes wrote, 'Edmund Kean was incomparably the greatest actor I have seen. . . .' At his best he transcended all limitations of face, body and voice, and he acted with his whole being: 'one might almost say "his body thought."' As Othello, he 'swelled up' till he looked almost as tall as Kemble, and all the deficiencies of

his voice were forgotten in the 'farewell' speech: 'I could hardly keep from crying,' wrote Crabb Robinson in his diary, 'it was pure feeling.' Hazlitt said that this speech 'struck on the heart like the swelling notes of some divine music, like the sound of years of departed happiness.' It was, Leigh Hunt records, 'spoken in long, lingering tones, like the sound of a parting knell. . . . ' Keats, indeed, praised all Kean's speaking: 'the elegance, gracefulness and music of elocution. . . . The sensual life of verse springs warm from the lips of Kean'; and there is no doubt that some of the violence of the opposition to Kean's acting—like the violence of his partisans—came from his apparent association with a 'movement' which roused fierce controversy in the world of literature and with which Keats himself was identified, together with Hazlitt, Hunt and other admirers of the actor. To many people Kean seemed the embodiment of romanticism. Not everyone would go as far as Keats in finding the tragedian 'a relict of romance' and 'a posthumous ray of chivalry,' but Coleridge's celebrated verdict that 'To see Kean was to read Shakespeare by flashes of lightning' expresses not only one substantial reason for Kean's popularity but also the 'romantic' approach to experience in the theatre.

Much of Kean's impact depended on where you were sitting in the theatre. As Sir Edward Mortimer in *The Iron Chest*, leaving the stage, he had to say the famous line of warning: 'Wilford, remember!' Lewes noted that 'Kean used to pause after "Wilford," and during the pause his face underwent a rapid succession of expressions fluently melting into each other, and all tending to one climax of threat; and then the deep tones of "remember!" came like muttered thunder. Those spectators who were unable to

catch these expressions considered the pause a mere trick; and sometimes the pauses were only tricks, but often they were subtle truths.' Again, Hazlitt noted: 'I have seen Mr. Kean play Sir Giles Overreach one night from the front of the pit, and a few nights after from the front boxes, facing the stage. It was another thing altogether. That which had been so lately nothing but flesh and blood, a living fibre, "instinct with fire" and spirit, was no better than a little fantoccini figure, darting backwards and forwards on the stage, starting, screaming and playing a number of fantastic tricks before the audience.' Those who saw Kean from the boxes, Hazlitt explained, 'have not seen him at all. The expression of his face is quite lost, and only the harsh and grating tones of his voice produce their full effect on the ear. . . . All you discover is an abstraction of his defects, both of person, voice and manner. He appears to be a little man in a great passion.' If Kean was a victim of contemporary architecture (and the patent laws) it was because, again in Hazlitt's words: 'his face is the running comment on his acting, which reconciles the audience to it. Without that index to his mind, you are not prepared for the vehemence and suddenness of his gestures; his pauses are long, abrupt and unaccountable, if not filled up by the expression; it is in the working of his face that you see the writhing and coiling of his passions before they make their serpent-spring; the lightning of his eye precedes the hoarse burst of thunder from his voice.' When he appeared at the Lyceum, which was a good deal smaller than Covent Garden or Drury Lane, a critic commented: 'To see Kean at this house, is something like looking at a beautiful object through a microscope, all the brilliancy of which is enhanced, and minuter beauties invisible to the naked eye,

are developed with a perfection that astonishes you. . . .'

It was, above all, Kean's eyes which had to be seen near-at-hand: 'black, large, brilliant and penetrating, and remarkable for the shortness of their upper lid, which discovered a clearly-defined line of white above the ball.' They contributed largely to the brilliance of his mime. With all his limitations of voice, it is not surprising that most of Kean's greatest 'points' were scored in silence or when, instead of speaking the words, he choked over them in grief and rage. Such a scene was Macbeth's appearance after the murder: 'The hesitation, the bewildered look, the coming to himself when he sees his hands bloody; the manner in which his voice clung to his throat, and choaked his utterance; his agony and tears, the force of nature overcome by passion, beggared description.' Hazlitt observed that as Othello, 'where he listens in dumb despair to the fiend-like insinuations of Iago, he presented the very face, the marble aspect of Dante's Count Ugolino. On his fixed eyelids "Horror sat plumed." ' As Romeo, two moments were remembered—when he gulped with tenderness over Juliet's name, and when he died. Kean's death-scenes were justly famous, and have been distinguished by Leigh Hunt. As Richard III, 'he falls from exhaustion—and as loss of blood may be presumed to cool his frame and restore his sanity, so does he grow calmer and calmer through the dying speech; till his mighty heart is hushed for ever. In *Othello*, death is occasioned by piercing himself to the heart with a poignard; can you not mark the frozen shudder, as the steel enters the frame, and the choking expression, with distended eyes and open mouth. . . . Death by a *heart* wound is *instantaneous*. Thus does he pourtray it; he literally dies standing; it is the dead body only of Othello that falls,



EDMUND KEAN
As Richard III, 1823



WILLIAM CHARLES MACREADY

As Macbeth, 1835

After a painting by H. Tracey

heavily and at once; there is no *rebound*, which speaks of vitality and of living muscles. It is the dull weight of clay seeking its kindred earth. But the scene that actors admire most . . . is his death in *Hamlet*. The Prince does not die of a sword-wound, but from the poison impregnated in that wound: of course, from its rapidity in doing the work of death, it must have been a powerful mineral. What are the effects of such a poison? Intense internal pain, wandering vision, swelling veins in the temple. All this Kean details with awful reality; his eyes dilate and then lose lustre; he gnaws his hand in the vain effort to repress emotion; the veins thicken in his forehead; his limbs shudder and quiver, and as life grows fainter, and his hand drops from between his stiffening lips, he utters a cry of expiring nature, so exquisite that I can only compare it to the stifled sob of a fainting woman, or the little wail of a suffering child.' If he sometimes failed to distinguish his characters in life, they won their differences in death.

Kean's art was one of romantic *chiaoscuro*, with many sharp contrasts in light and shade, and he found perhaps his richest opportunities and his fullest range—if not his most characteristic success—in the third act of *Othello*. 'Never were the workings of the human heart more successfully laid open than in the scene following that in which Iago first excites his jealousy. In every tone of the voice, in every movement of the face and body, it might be seen labouring under the accumulated agonies of unbounded love, struggling with and at length yielding to doubt. The depth of expression thrown into the words, "I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips", has never been surpassed; then came the utter heart-sinking and helplessness which inevitably succeeds to the protracted operation of powerful

passion. The speech beginning "Oh now for ever, farewell," etc., was given in a tone of quiet despair, which evinced the most exquisite delicacy of conception, embodied in expression absolutely perfect. To this calm succeeded a storm of contending passions—rage, hatred, intervening doubt—until at length the whole of his already excited energies were yielded up to revenge; the look and action accompanying the word "O, blood! Iago, blood!" cast a chill over one's whole frame.' G. H. Lewes wrote, of a much later performance in the same role: 'In the successive unfolding of these great scenes he represented with incomparable effect the lion-like fury, the deep and haggard pathos, the forlorn sense of desolation alternating with gusts of stormy cries for vengeance, the misgivings and sudden reassurance, the calm and deadly resolution of one not easily moved, but who, being moved, was stirred to the very depths.' It was, Hazlitt said, 'twenty times more powerful' than Kean's Shylock and 'the finest piece of acting in the world.' Yet Kean played it with a complexion of 'tawny brick-dust', in the costume of an Albanian Greek, and struck at least one dissenter as 'a little vixenish black girl in short petticoats.'

To many observers all this fire and turbulence and fury was the outpouring of nature, unpremeditated and instinctive. Certainly, the electricity and the thunder of Kean's storms upon the stage were charged by the energies of his own unruly and disordered soul: that was the force which gave the look of 'naturalism', of inevitability, to so many of the characters he played: that was why so many people found him impossible to resist. 'He lifted you off your feet,' said Samuel Phelps: he swept the audience with a tidal wave of passion. But, at his most oceanic, Kean acted with

systematic care and deliberation. To an inexperienced playgoer like Keats, it seemed that he 'delivered himself up to the instant feeling, without a shadow of a thought about anything else.' Yet G. H. Lewes assures us that he 'vigilantly and patiently rehearsed every detail, trying the tones until his ear was satisfied, practising looks and gestures until his artistic sense was satisfied . . . one who often acted with him informed me that when Kean was rehearsing on a new stage he accurately counted the number of steps he had to take before reaching a certain spot, or before uttering a certain word. . . . ' George Vandenhoff, who appeared with Kean, recorded that: 'his delivery of Othello's "Farewell" ran on the same tones and semi-tones, had the same rests and breaks, the same forte and piano, the same crescendo and diminuendo, night after night, as if he spoke it from a musical score. So, all his most striking attitudes—and he was the most picturesque of players—all his most effective *points*, and abrupt transitions of voice and manner, were reproduced in oft-repeated performances . . . so that his admirers were ready with their applause almost by anticipation. . . . '

'Did this detract from his genius,' Vandenhoff asked, and he rightly answered: 'No: it proved that he was an *artist*; and there is no art without *method* and *design*'—a truism which is sometimes forgotten among 'romantic' critics of the English stage. If English actors may be divided, according to the categories of Nietzsche, into 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysiac' schools, there is no doubt where Kean should be placed; yet it is as misleading to label him 'romantic' as to call Kemble a 'classic' actor. Both were empiricists, outside all schools, in the wider world of art outside the theatre: both were painstaking, self-conscious

craftsmen, building their personal eccentricities and weaknesses into a highly individual style of acting: both were artists. In many respects, Kean was the lesser of the two. He never shared the interest of Kemble and other great actors in production, in management, in the prestige or progress of the theatre: he was concerned with the stage only as the platform for himself alone—for the glory of *his* art and *his* personality. He could not tolerate competition: there was no future for talent under his management. What is more, he lost control of his dæmon. Harnessed by his conscience as an artist, it made him great; but, once off the leash, it destroyed him as a man and as an actor, and did much to destroy the social status of the theatre itself. Yet all comparisons and qualifications are, at the last, unprofitable. Kean was a great actor. He became a great legend. And as long as there are theatres for living actors, and Englishmen to watch them on the stage, his name will be remembered with awe, and homage, and compassion.

IV

WILLIAM CHARLES MACREADY

'O GOD! You brute!' The despairing bellow echoed along the corridors of Covent Garden. '*Beast of Hell!*' A shriek of murderous fury came from the wings. The actors, preparing for the worst, merely exchanged glances over their paints and powders. It was that insupportable, bad-tempered snob Macready working himself up into a rage again. Some unlucky stage-hand or supernumerary had touched off one of his blistering tempests of bullying. That night, however, much was forgiven Macready backstage at Covent Garden, for everyone knew that the fate of the theatre might depend upon his performance. This arrogant young tragedian, who had made an unspectacular London debut two years before, was actually daring to challenge Edmund Kean in his prize role of Richard III. The town had risen to the bait, and Covent Garden was packed to the doors for the first time in many months.

Within two years of John Philip Kemble's retirement, the great green-and-gold theatre had run upon the rocks. By the autumn of 1819 it was in danger of breaking up. Drury Lane had Kean and Munden, Fanny Kelly and Eliza Vestris, but Covent Garden had lost nearly all its stars. Charles Mayne Young had seceded, Miss O'Neill had retired, Liston was ill, Kitty Stephens was on leave, and Charles Kemble had walked out after quarrelling with the proprietor, Henry Harris. Persistently bad business was

made worse by accumulated building debts. The situation was so desperate that the leading actors agreed to work without pay until Christmas. 'I never knew in the morning,' said Harris later, 'whether I should not shoot myself before the night.' Macready was his standby. Under pressure from the box office, Harris asked 'the great W.C.M.'—as Kean scornfully called him—to undertake the role of Gloucester. Macready, deeply conscious of the risk, refused. But Harris's requests became more urgent, then more peremptory, until at last he forced the actor's hand by announcing the performance on the bills, at six days notice. 'There was now no escape!' Macready wrote in his reminiscences. 'I was committed to the public, and must undergo the ordeal.' The days were spent in concentrated study, with 'alternations of hope and fear'. Only the stock costumes of the theatre's wardrobe were available, and Macready had to pay out of his own pocket for their alteration, for there was not a penny to spare in the treasury. Although he had played Crookback before during his provincial apprenticeship (this was a role in the pack of every leading actor), it was not one of his favourites, and he believed that he could not *look* the part ('a hump-backed tall man is not in nature'). Yet if he failed in it at Covent Garden, his promising career might well be ruined. Much was in the balance on the night of October 25, 1819. For Macready it was 'a life-and-death grapple, and I threw my whole soul into all I did.' As a critic said the next morning, 'there was no middle point between disgrace and glory.'

The house buzzed with excited anticipation. Partisans of Kean and Kemble had come in force to watch this presumptuous young man—known hitherto for his villains in

melodrama—make an exhibition of himself. When he came on, they saw an actor of medium height (Macready was five feet nine), with blue eyes, square chin, high cheekbones, small mouth, massive forehead, and irregular nose, set in a flat, dark and somewhat ugly face. He was very nervous, and showed it. In his early scenes he was subdued and self-conscious. Behind the scenes there was gloom and despondency: among the Kean-ites in front there was high glee. Yet Macready rose with the play. His eyes flashed fire. His voice filled the theatre. His new conception of the character, owing nothing to Cooke or to Kean, gradually took command of the audience. He showed, as Hunt said later, 'the gayer part' of Crookback. 'His very step in the more sanguine scenes, had a princely gaiety of self-possession, and seemed to walk off to the music of its approaching triumph.' Compared with Kean, whose strength was already waning, he maintained greater energy and consistency, lighting up sections of the play which the older tragedian hurried over between his famous 'points.' Hunt, a disciple of Kean, wrote that 'Mr. Kean's is the more gloomy and reflective villain, rendered so by the united effect of his deformity and subtle-mindedness; Mr. Macready's is the more ardent and bold-faced one, borne up by a temperament naturally high and sanguine, though pulled down by mortification.' Although this version followed the usual Cibber text, Macready had tried in his study of the character to 'carry the spirit of the great original' through what he contemptuously described as these 'sententious and stagey lines.' (A year later he restored more of the 'great original's' play to the stage.)

It was in giving Tyrrel orders for disposing of the Princes' bodies that Macready's triumph was assured. As Tyrrel

hurried off, and Crookback triumphantly exclaimed, 'Why then my loudest fears are hushed!' the pit rose at him. Everyone stood up, waving hats and handkerchiefs, and cheering for several minutes. In the tent scene, where Kean scored some of his greatest effects, there was another excited outburst of applause; and the pit rose again at Crookback's death, Kean's *pièce de résistance*. When, after the curtain fell, an actor appeared (according to custom) to 'give out' the play—that is, to announce its next performance—the audience would not give him a hearing. Stamping their feet and cheering wildly, they shouted for Macready. For the first time in the history of Covent Garden Theatre the star of the evening was called before the curtain to take his bow. Not even John Philip Kemble had been so honoured. Macready had not eclipsed Kean, but he was now acknowledged in many quarters as his peer. 'His Richard was perfectly original,' as the *Morning Chronicle* said next day, 'yet there was no apparent struggle after originality, no laborious effort to mark a difference in passages of small importance. . . . It was the natural unforced and unaffected effort of an intellect relying on its own powers. . . .' With one performance he had put his elders, Charles Kemble and Charles Young, in the shade. 'The mark at which I had aimed so long was now attained. I was the undisputed head of the theatre.' And the theatre was saved!

A month later, on November 29th, Macready made—at Henry Harris's request—another audacious experiment. He appeared as Coriolanus. John Philip Kemble had appeared in what was probably his greatest role at the same theatre only two years before, at his farewell from the stage, and Macready—fully conscious of the risks of challenging

'the noblest Roman's' memory—went into training during November. In order 'to add dignity and grace to my deportment,' he took lessons from the ballet-master in 'the various attitudes from the antique', practising statuesque poses and a classic stride. Yet he had no intention of appearing as a second-rate Kemble. Although he hoped to 'master the patrician's outward bearing,' he aimed at 'giving full vent to the unbridled passion of the man,' following a conception of Caius Marcius in strong contrast to John Philip's remembered marble grandeur. Instead of working up the one sentiment of dignified contempt to an extraordinary pitch of intensity, in John Forster's words, he brought to life a fierce, proud man fighting a tumult of emotions. Macready could not inspire the awe with which Kemble's Coriolanus filled the audience; but in place of Kemble's monotonous declamation he gave a ranging variety of speech, and in place of Kemble's cracked and husky tones he supplied what Leigh Hunt described as 'the finest and most heroic' voice on the stage. When the Covent Garden curtain fell, the cheering audience once again demanded that Macready himself should appear before it and 'give out' the play, repeating the honour they had paid to his Richard.

Macready had now, at the age of twenty-six, successfully challenged both Kean and Kemble in their best roles. He rounded off this momentous season of 1819–1820 with a triumphant performance in a play which owed nothing to either actor, for Macready introduced it to the London stage. It was called *Virginius; or, The Liberation of Rome*, and had recently been turned down by Kean. Yet at his first reading of the manuscript in April, 1820, Macready saw its rich opportunities. He persuaded Harris to accept

it, paid for his own costumes ('not one sixpence was allowed for its *mise-en-scène*,' he says), and produced it himself, putting the company through unprecedentedly painstaking rehearsals. Within a month of receiving the manuscript, Macready had mounted *Virginus* at Covent Garden, and the first performance, on May 17, was a triumph both for him and for the Irish author, James Sheridan Knowles. Several of Knowles's plays had already been produced in the provinces, but it was with *Virginus* in 1820 that he first made his mark in the London theatre, where for a generation his work was highly honoured. To the modern reader *Virginus* and its companion pieces may well seem mortuary fare, with their pseudo-Elizabethan verse and their cardboard psychology, yet Knowles was an erstwhile actor with the gift—surprisingly rare among aspiring dramatists, now as then—of writing actable rhetoric and arranging stage-worthy situations, and *Virginus* stood out above the contemporary fustian by virtue of its humanity and sentiment. For some thirty years it provided Macready with perhaps the most popular part in his repertoire—as a noble Roman father who stabs his own daughter to save her from the lust of a tyrant. It gave him scope for the terror and the pathos in which he excelled (he could command 'a tone of exquisite touchingness'); and it introduced, moreover, that kind of relative *naturalism* with which he had already coloured *Coriolanus*. The appeal of *Virginus* lay, as R. H. Horne said, in its 'domestic feeling. The costume, the setting, the decorations are heroic. We have Roman tunics, but a modern English heart—the scene is the Forum, but the sentiments those of the "Bedford Arms."'

At the end of this triumphant season, Macready played *Macbeth* for the first time, on his benefit night. He was

received with great enthusiasm. The performance became, in later years, one of the most popular in his repertoire. Yet the occasion was remarkable for another reason, too. By long-standing tradition, playgoers took the opportunity of a benefit night to give a present—usually in money—to the player concerned. But Macready broke the tradition by sending all the gifts back, and making it a rule ‘not to accept more than the value of the tickets required’. Among the aristocratic patrons snubbed in this way were Lord Glengall and Colonel Berkeley, but they admitted—Macready says proudly in his reminiscences—that ‘it was “impossible to be offended” with me.’ That he was prepared to risk, for he was determined to be accepted as a gentleman. ‘I could not consider myself sitting down to table on terms of social equality with a man to whom I had been obliged for the gift of five, ten or twenty pounds.’ John Philip Kemble had no such scruples: here was an omen for the future.

Here, too, was a triple achievement—as Richard, Coriolanus and Virginius—which signified the highest promise for Macready’s future. Yet, in spite of many successes in plays old and new, he marked time for many years. It was not until after Kean’s death, in 1833, that he was acknowledged as the first player of the English stage, and even today his claim to be ranked with Kean and Kemble is hotly contested. In death, as in life, Macready is still the centre of an argument.

William Charles Macready was born in London, on March 3, 1793, the fifth child—and eldest surviving son—of an Irish actor and his English wife. The elder Macready (whose name was also spelt M’Cready and McCready) was

the son of a Dublin upholsterer, who had come to England eight years before in search of theatrical glory. He soon found a wife in Christina Birch, a fellow-member of the Manchester company, and a job as 'walking gentleman' at Covent Garden; but there he remained, in serviceable obscurity, throughout the rest of his acting career. This ended, however, when Macready was five years old, for his father moved into a very different social sphere by taking over the full-time management of the Theatre Royal, Birmingham, with a circuit of satellite theatres in Leicester, Stafford and other towns. Macready's childhood, then, was steeped in theatrical lore; he was well acquainted with the backstage world of provincial players; but he had no inclination to join them—and his father had no intention, it seems, of putting him on the boards. The elder Macready was both ambitious and successful enough to send his son to Rugby, with an eye on Oxford and the Bar. In spite of his stage connections, Macready seems to have suffered no especial persecution at his public school, but at the age of fifteen he was obliged to leave: his father had over-reached himself by leasing a new theatre in Manchester, and was now unable to pay the Rugby fees. With deep reluctance, but a strong sense of duty, Macready prepared to make a career upon the stage. The circumstances of that decision affected his entire life, and warped his development as an artist.

Under the intermittent supervision of his father, who frequently went into hiding to avoid arrest, Macready began to train himself in Manchester for his new profession after the Christmas of 1808. He took lessons in fencing; learned by heart some suitable 'juvenile' roles; and listened to his father's lectures on the style of Charles Macklin and

John Henderson, whom he set up as models in acting. ('In after life,' Macready wrote mournfully in his reminiscences, 'I had . . . the difficult task of unlearning much that was impressed on me in my boyish days.') Within a few months of leaving Rugby, this sixteen-year-old boy had to shoulder the responsibility of looking after a theatre on his own: he managed his father's company at Newcastle for two months in the summer. In the autumn he paid his first visit to London, in order to study the leading actors of the day and to take fencing lessons with Angelo. Macready saw Charles Kemble, Elliston, Munden, Cooke, Emery and Liston, but he was expressly forbidden by his father to watch John Philip Kemble, in case he should become a mere copyist of the great man's style. The day after he returned to Manchester, his father went to prison for debt, and Macready was left alone to look after his interests. It was a hard and sudden lesson, but he met the challenge well. He took charge of the company at Chester, where rent and salaries were in arrears, and both actors and proprietor were hostile. Having cleared off the debts, he managed to open the Newcastle theatre on Boxing Day (by pawning his watch) and to run a successful season there. Before it had ended, his resilient father was at liberty again and in full command.

Macready's brief experience of poverty and hardship was already over. From now onwards it was plain sailing. That summer his father reopened the Birmingham theatre, and arranged his son's debut as an actor, in the role of Romeo, on June 7, 1810. Lacking any sense of vocation, he assures us, Macready did his best to prepare for the dreaded event by hard labour, until he 'got by rote . . . every particular of place, gesture, feeling and intonation.'

At first, he records in his reminiscences, he was like 'an automaton' in a 'kind of waking dream', but then he was wakened by the applause. 'I gained my self-possession, and really entered into the spirit of the character and, I may say, felt the passion I was to represent.' When, after the curtain fell, someone asked the young Macready how he felt, he answered exuberantly: 'I feel as if I should like to act it all over again.' Here is a key to the rest of his career. For all his hankering after church and bar, he was born for the stage.

After Romeo, he played Norval, Zanga and George Barnwell with success in that inaugural season. Every night, on getting home, the young man conducted private rehearsals, polishing up and correcting his performance; and every Sunday he got the key of the theatre from his father, and after morning service he would lock himself in, take the stage, and practise exits, entrances, gestures and attitudes, acting over all his characters until he was tired out. For four years, Macready continued his apprenticeship—but as the leading man and, often enough, as producer (though the job of 'getting up' and rehearsing a play was not then a specialised profession). He led his father's companies in Newcastle, Leicester, Glasgow, Dumfries and Carlisle, playing most of the main roles in the repertoire, both comedy and tragedy, history and spectacle—Rolla, Oronooko, Young Marlow, Falconbridge, Aladdin, Orestes, Richard II, Mark Antony and Richard III and Hamlet (at 18)—in all, some 75 parts. He played with Charles Mayne Young. 'Young gentleman,' he told Macready, 'you expend a degree of power unnecessarily; half the energy and fire that you employ would be more sufficient.' He played with Mrs. Siddons. 'You are in

the right way,' she advised him, 'but remember what I say. Study, study, study, and do not marry until you are thirty.' Macready took all the advice to heart, treasured the experience, and learned to command himself and others. Although he was under his father's thumb, a position of dependence from which he sometimes broke away in a fierce quarrel, he was in authority at the theatre. At Bath, in 1814, word of his quality reached London, and John Fawcett—stage manager of Covent Garden and old friend of his father—was sent down to investigate and negotiate. But Macready was in no hurry; his place was secure, and he had much to learn; so he refused the offer, and went off to Dublin. It was not until two years later that he signed a contract with Covent Garden for the long-term engagement that he wanted—for five years, with a weekly salary rising from £16 to £18.

Macready made his debut on September 16, 1816, in an auburn wig and a pseudo-Greek tunic in a pseudo-Greek play. He appeared as Orestes in *The Distrest Mother*, Ambrose Philips's version of Racine's *Andromaque*, carefully chosen for the purpose because it had not been revived for some years and would therefore not provoke comparisons with established actors of the day. At rehearsal, Macready was secretly dismayed by the vastness of the theatre, so alarmingly bigger than the provincial playhouses to which he was accustomed; but at night, he overcame all his difficulties and was given an enthusiastic reception, in which Kean—conspicuous in a box—ostentatiously shared. Not all the critics were so warm: *The Times* classified him condescendingly as 'a man of clear conception, of much energy, and some skill,' and the *News* observed that 'Mr. Macready is the plainest and

most awkwardly-made man that ever trod the stage.' But the *News* continued that it preferred him to Kean 'in some respects,' and Hazlitt wrote that he was unquestionably 'by far the best tragic actor that has come out in our remembrance, with the exception of Kean.' There was, however, limited scope for him at Covent Garden, while Charles Young and Charles Kemble led the company. Most of the leading roles were, perforce, closed to him, and during the next three years he made a reputation as a stage villain, or—in his own dry words—as 'the undisputed representative of the disagreeable'. Gradually, he hammered out a style, taking the measure of the house, the audience and himself, unlearning the lessons of his father and absorbing those of Kean and others. By October, 1817, his self-education was already in danger. Offended by the 'puerility' of his parts and the manners of his fellow actors (he objected to the moral tone of green-room gossip) he contemplated entering the church. But then another call upon his loyalties kept him on the stage: he found that he needed money to buy a commission for his favourite brother Edward, so he swallowed his scruples and continued reluctantly in his career. That, at least, is Macready's story. In March, 1818 he made a success as Rob Roy, in the first dramatisation of Scott's novel (published three months before); and after the triumph of the 1819-20 season he made no more plans to exchange the stage for the pulpit.

For the next sixteen years Macready held his place as a star, second only to Edmund Kean. When he was in London, he acted—from 1823 onwards—at Drury Lane; but he spent a large part of the year on tour in the provinces, with a small repertoire of his most popular roles, and he made a successful visit to America. Scores of new

roles, in plays ancient and modern, were attempted. He triumphed in Byron's *Werner* and Sheridan Knowles's *William Tell*; he made one of his rare successes in comedy as Oakly in *The Jealous Wife*; he added Leontes, King John, Lear and Wolsey to his Shakespearian laurels; and all the while he continued to improve and strengthen his Macbeth, Hamlet, Iago, and Virginius. Despising the company of actors, Macready made his friends outside the theatre among writers and artists such as Talfourd, Dickens, Bulwer Lytton, Stanfield. He occupied a special place in London society as a gentlemanly actor, at a time when Kean had intensified the odium of his profession, and he earned enough money—some £4,000 a year—to maintain it. He was, moreover, happily married, and became the devoted father of a large family. Yet, in spite of this success, he was frustrated and dissatisfied; and, indeed, he failed to grow to the size which critics had expected on the showing of his 1819–20 season. 'If he had died or retired from the stage in the winter of 1835–6,' as William Archer says, 'it might have been said with apparent truth that he had for some time been losing ground, and had not fulfilled the promise of his early years.'

For this blockage in Macready's career there were, perhaps, two principal reasons—psychological and theatrical. As a man, he could not brook being under 'the single sway of an actor': that was why he left Covent Garden in 1823, in a fury against Charles Kemble; he had to be in charge, unchallenged, at the top. In his life, as in his art, he was by nature 'a despot,' as he himself admitted. As long as Kean lived, he was under a cloud. But, what was more, he had to work—for sixteen years—under the instructions of a motley collection of managers whom he

despised. He was a displaced actor, without a theatre. He *had* to act at one of the patent theatres, because they were the only ones licensed for legitimate drama, but he loathed the whole ramshackle system. Even in Garrick's time, neither Covent Garden nor Drury Lane could survive without their afterpieces, but by the 1830's both theatres, overwhelmed by debt and threatened by competition, were in desperate straits. The vast new urban audience preferred, increasingly, to take its light entertainment at the 'minor' theatres which sprang up to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding London, and although a new tragedian might draw the crowds for a time to the Garden or the Lane the prestige and popularity of the old Shakespearian and pseudo-classic repertoire was in decline. These two enormous playhouses were doomed as temples of the drama, although a succession of managers tried to save them with circus, opera and other expedients, and the 'patent' system which had inflated them to such monstrous and unprofitable proportions was doomed as well.

For Macready the last straw was Alfred Bunn. This bouncy, vulgar showman took over both theatres in dual harness from 1833 to 1835, cutting salaries and making one company work a double shift, in the effort to make the 'patents' pay. This venture also failed, and in the season of 1835-6 Bunn had only the Lane under his command, with Macready (whom he strongly disliked) as his leading actor. He had invited Macready back because of his drawing-power in the legitimate drama, but when a new opera and melodrama caught the fancy of the town the great tragedian was virtually shelved for several months. What was worse, Bunn made him appear in an afterpiece, *William Tell*. But the final indignity was the humiliating announcement

that Macready must play in an abbreviated, three-act version of *Richard III*, to make room in the same bill for the popular melodramatic spectacle, *The Jewess*, and the 'grand chivalric entertainment' of *Chevy Chase*. After furious protests at this insult to himself and to his art, Macready obeyed Bunn's orders; but after the performance that night, passing the manager's office, all his rage boiled up again and exploded. He threw open the door, shouted: 'You damned scoundrel! How dare you use me in this manner?' and as the astonished Bunn rose to his feet Macready struck him hard across the face. A fierce scuffle began. Bunn's ankle was sprained and Macready's finger was bitten before the two panting men were pulled apart. The manager was carried off to bed, and the tragedian was banned from the theatre. Later Macready was sued for assault, and had to pay Bunn £150 damages. To the end of his life he repented that brawl, noting its anniversary at times in his diary as a day of shame, yet in a curious way it seems to have pushed him out of his rut and opened a new phase in his career.

Twelve days after the fight at Drury Lane Macready appeared as Macbeth at Covent Garden. He feared the worst: if outraged, the audience's sense of propriety could, as Kemble and Kean knew only too well, take strange and violent forms of protest. But as he entered, Macready saw the house rise to its feet in a warm and tumultuous welcome; and his public apology after the performance—'I feel, and shall never cease to feel, the deepest and most poignant self-reproach and regret'—was greeted with fervent enthusiasm. Never before, perhaps, had Macready been quite so popular—as a man. His assault on Bunn won him, for a time at least, a place in the public's

affections, and his prestige as an artist was enhanced by his discovery of a new role. Before the month was out, Macready achieved one of his greatest successes in *Ion*, a Greco-Victorian tragedy by his lawyer-friend Thomas Talfourd, who borrowed the theme from Euripides: Macready appeared as a noble youth of Argos, who sacrifices himself and his royal father to save the city. Another good augury was his appearance, early in 1836, in a new play by the fashionable novelist and politician Edward Bulwer (later Lord Lytton), who was to create two of Macready's most popular roles: Bragelone, in *The Duchess de la Vallière*, was not one of them. Robert Browning, too, wrote a play for Macready, though *Strafford* unfortunately belongs to that bizarre theatrical category labelled 'study drama.' Browning and Bulwer were among the many writers and artists in Macready's circle. With their encouragement, he now took a decisive step forward. In the summer of 1837, not long after the accession of Queen Victoria, he decided that it was time to begin his own reign. At the age of forty-four, he at last resolved to assume the management of a theatre. Before the patent system was ended, he would take advantage of its privileges to restore the honour and glory of the stage. No other candidate was in the field; his hated enemy, Bunn, was still in power at Drury Lane; and so, in October 1837, he inaugurated his regime at Covent Garden. He engaged a strong company, including Helen Faucit, Priscilla Horton and Samuel Phelps, who became in turn the leader of the English stage; and including, of course, the usual establishment of pantomimists and singers, for like all the patent managers Macready could not afford—for all his high ideals—to live on the drama alone. With a

commendable faith in good public relations, the new manager explained the purpose of his season to the press and asked celebrities in science, art and literature to his first nights (Carlyle and Faraday, invited in this way, became two of Macready's firm admirers). He also took steps to improve the moral tone of the theatre, by checking the pernicious system of puffery in the bills, and by excluding prostitutes from their accustomed hunting-grounds in the boxes. All went surprisingly well, and Covent Garden won back much of its old honour. Yet within two years Macready was exhausted and bored by the burdens of management. After a short gap he embarked on another theatrical command—this time at Drury Lane—but that, too, only lasted for two years, from 1841 to 1843. In the following year the ancient privileges of the patent houses were annulled by Act of Parliament, and an era of free trade in the theatre was launched. Macready never repeated the experiment in management. 'In his heart of hearts,' one historian says, 'he cared too little about the enterprise to give it any chance of permanency.' Yet at Covent Garden and at Drury Lane, in his four years of leadership, Macready wrote a new chapter in the history of the English stage.

To begin with, he set and kept his standards high. It would have been easy to avoid losses by keeping his most successful productions in the repertoire until their popularity was exhausted, but he insisted upon frequent changes of programme, on the primacy of the legitimate drama, and, in particular, upon the supremacy of Shakespeare. Macready set his face against the 'long run', which was soon to remould the shape of the English theatre. What is more, he showed an unprecedented respect for the

Shakespearian text. He restored *The Tempest* to the stage (although the shipwreck was presented only as a spectacle, and Ariel was played by a girl, Priscilla Horton). He restored the Chorus to *Henry V* (although he introduced decorative tableaux to illustrate the speeches, with a Stanfield diorama). His *Macbeth* still included the singing witches, but *The Times* observed that it was 'almost a new play'. But perhaps the most striking of Macready's reforms was his rejection of the Nahum Tate *King Lear*, and his restoration of the greater part of the original (although he cast Priscilla Horton as the Fool).

Macready also did his conscientious best for the contemporary drama, presenting such plays as Westland Marston's *The Patrician's Daughter*, Sheridan Knowles's *Woman's Wit*, Byron's *Marino Faliero*, and Browning's *A Blot on the 'Scutcheon*. Few of these, not surprisingly, were box-office successes, but two of Macready's new plays became public favourites throughout the century. Both were written for him by the versatile Edward Bulwer, and both were costume dramas. Feeling 'something of the Brotherhood of Art,' the author made a present to Macready of *The Lady of Lyons*, in which the tragedian appeared as a 'juvenile lead' at the age of forty-nine. He took the role of Claude Melnotte, a young French peasant who masquerades as a prince, marries an heiress, but reveals himself in his true colours before the marriage is consummated. In spite of his deception, Pauline promises to wait for him, and he goes off to the wars to make his fortune, returning two years later covered in glory and gold. Even more popular was Lytton's *Richelieu*, in which Macready—moving into a more appropriate age-group—triumphed as the foxy old cardinal of seventeenth century

France, outwitting all his enemies, threatening 'the curse of Rome', shamming death to win a last-minute victory at the final curtain. In print this may seem a stagey confection of romantic rhetoric—'a mixture of bad Hugo with worse Dumas', according to one disapproving French critic—but Macready was only the first of many fine actors, on both sides of the Atlantic, to use it as a platform for some of his finest work.

Macready was, moreover, a pioneer in the producer's art. He resolved, as he put it, 'to rehearse with the same earnestness as I should act,' and this resulted—in the words of Dr. Ernest Bradlee Watson—in 'the most influential and radical change in the manner and tone of acting that had been known since, at least, the days of Garrick.' Macready rehearsals became notorious in the profession: long, squabbling, and often humiliating ordeals in which he appeared at his most despotic. 'I thought for and acted to myself every character and every supernumerary figure,' he noted, 'and taught them to act as I would have done had I been cast in their places.' Such martinet discipline is not in favour today, and it helped to create a 'Macready school' in which—as in all schools of acting—the mannerisms of the master were usually more noticeable than his talent. Yet one result was that, according to one eyewitness, 'London saw its literary drama carefully acted in all its parts' for the first time. Macready was particularly successful with the production of crowd scenes in Shakespeare. 'The mob in *Coriolanus*,' said John Forster, 'were now for the first time shown upon the stage, on a level with the witches in *Macbeth*, as agents of the tragic catastrophe . . . a proper, massy crowd of dangerous, violent fellows', instead of the half-dozen supernumeraries

pitted against John Philip Kemble. In the same production, the Volscian army on the Appian way, with battering-rams and moving-towers, seemed to spread over the stage in their thousands; and Macready contrived a memorable effect when the Volscian ranks opened for a long file of Roman women dressed in black, 'one long dreary sable line of monotonous misery.' Here, indeed, as in other productions, he seems—as William Archer observed—to have anticipated many of the methods of the Meiningen company, which made such an impression upon the European theatre sixty years later. With painstaking concern for pictorial effect and accuracy of setting, he carried a good deal further the reforms of John Philip Kemble some thirty years before. His Shakespearian staging was elaborate, picturesque, and, by the standards of the time, realistic.

After the Drury Lane season of 1842-3, however, Macready made no attempt to continue his reforms elsewhere. During the next eight years he spent a large part of the time on tour in the provinces and America, accumulating enough money on which to retire from the stage. The end of his acting career was unhappily overclouded by the events of his second American tour in 1848-9. The leading transatlantic tragedian, Edwin Forrest, whose monomania was probably surpassed only by Macready's and whose talents were certainly inferior, believed that Macready was responsible for the general lack of enthusiasm displayed by the British public for his own acting. The English actor had, so Forrest asserted, influenced the critics, the managers and the playgoers against him. Such fantasies had an unfortunate effect upon the inflammable national vanity of Forrest's compatriots. Throughout

Macready's tour there were signs of organised opposition in the press and the audience, and when he appeared in May at the Astor Place Opera House in New York this underground resentment bubbled to the surface. Violent riots broke out; the theatre was besieged; troops were called in; and a pitched battle was fought, in which many people were killed. Macready's own life was in danger, and he had to leave New York in disguise. Two years later—on February 26, 1851—he gave his farewell performance at Drury Lane, in the role of Macbeth. He noted in his diary: 'not one feeling of regret intermingled with the placid satisfaction accompanying my performance of every act, needfully preparative to the coming event, as I said to myself, "I shall never have to do this again."' The feeling of relief was profound: the good-bye was final. Never again was Macready seen upon the stage, although he lived for another twenty-two years, enjoying the quiet retirement of a country life in the role of an English squire. When he died—on April 27, 1873—Covent Garden had long been turned over to opera; the number of playhouses in London had trebled, since he first entered the profession of acting; and the entire British theatre was being transformed.

In print, William Charles Macready is the most fascinating of our actors. His diaries ensure him a place in theatrical literature, not only because front-rank players are rarely so articulate, but because of the horrified candour with which he records the dramatic conflict in his own soul, the violent love-and-hate he cherished towards his own profession, the mixture of monstrous vanity and agonised humility. Understandably enough, he was one of

the best loathed men in the annals of the English theatre. Like Kemble, Macready was born into the managerial purple, but he had none of Black Jack's experience of the ranks. Had he been obliged in his youth to tout for work, to go hungry, to sweat on the treadmill of the 'walking gentleman', he might have had more patience with his colleagues and subordinates, but he never knew the heartaches and hardships of the average player's life. From the moment of his debut he was accustomed to power, and he found it insupportably difficult—after the long dominion of his father—to take orders from anybody else. Garrick, too, began at the top, without experience of the rank and file, but he had in a high degree the gifts of compromise and diplomacy. For Macready it was a personal humiliation to appear with inferior actors, to tolerate anything that detracted from his own glory and the virtue of the play. Extravagantly vain and ferociously proud, he was autocratic without dignity and self-analytical without charity: he had none of Kemble's good fellowship offstage, his love of a boozy stag party. He treated most of his actors abominably, and they detested him. To 'Sergeant Macready' most of these 'miserable wretches' were 'Beasts'; all too often they were 'Beasts of Hell.' True, there *were* Beasts in plenty, especially on the provincial stage: the leading lady who fell down dead drunk at her first speech, the prompter who gave Macready the word during his pauses, the stage manager who had to be put in a straightjacket, the actors who 'dried up', or came on holding up their breeches, or simply failed to appear. But the trouble was that Macready was pathologically ashamed, *off the stage*, of being an actor at all, and he took his revenge on his fellow galley-slaves. At his most choleric

he dismissed them *all*: 'the members of this profession—I know of no exception—are either utter blackguards or most ignorant empirics. . . . I had rather see one of my children dead than on the stage.' In cooler mood, before a committee of inquiry in 1832, he humbled his own craft: 'The profession of the actor appears at present to be the very worst that an intellectual man can select . . . no person who had the power of doing anything better would, unless deluded into it, take it up.'

Macready was not, of course, 'deluded' into it. He was, so he would have us believe, forced into it by filial piety, kept in it by brotherly love, and remained in it because of financial necessity. These were all virtuous excuses; but Macready would never admit, to the public or to himself, the fundamental reason why he suffered the indignity of the 'beasts' and 'brutes' who, for him, made up the acting profession, why he allowed himself to be branded as a rogue and vagabond, why he maintained throughout his career a fierce defensive war against a largely imaginary barrage of insults and snubs. It was, quite simply, that he *enjoyed* being an actor—on the stage: he could not escape his nature. 'Whatever he might say,' as Mr. J. C. Trewin observes, 'William Charles Macready belonged to the theatre'. It was the knowledge that he belonged, that he was an actor in spite of himself, which convulsed him with violent rage and inner doubt, and which spurred him on to achieve a gentlemanly retirement of deep, deep boredom, undisturbed for over twenty years by any return to the art he had practised with so much reluctance and so much honour.

As the first player of the English stage, Macready had many obvious weaknesses. Physically, he lacked the grace

of Garrick, the dignity of Kemble, the lithe energy of Kean: 'he handled a foil like a pitchfork.' His face was flat and seemed, in his younger days, ugly and inexpressive. When Charles Kemble prophesied that Macready would be a star, his brother John 'took a pinch of snuff, and with a significant smile rejoined: "Oh Charles! With *that* face!"' Among his many mannerisms was a kind of premeditated stutter, catching his breath in an 'er-er' before certain syllables; he made (like Kean) sudden swoops in tone and volume; and he is still remembered for 'that Macready pause', though Quin, Garrick and Kemble before him had paused, it seems, with no less frequency and emphasis. As he grew older, such mannerisms grew more conspicuous, not only in voice but in attitude. Westland Marston, a warm admirer, records that 'he had, in moments of repose, a monotonous proneness to standing in the same posture—one knee, a little bent, before the other.' More serious was his occasional lack of control over his own emotions: Macduffs were overwhelmed by whispered oaths at Dunsinane, and sometimes took a cut too many; Desdemonas were terrified that he would leave them black and blue. In general, he stayed close to the human character and sometimes missed the poetic truth: Leigh Hunt noted that he seemed 'afraid of the poetry of some of his greatest parts, as if it would hurt the effect of his naturalness and his more familiar passages,' and G. H. Lewes complained that 'he was irritable where he should have been passionate, querulous where he should have been terrible.' On his first nights, in particular, he rarely *soared*: 'he seldom struck twelve at once in the big Shakespearian roles, but worked his way forwards, steadily polishing and perfecting.

'Mac' was one of his own sharpest critics. He noted in

his diary that 'the habit of scowling or looking from under my brow, especially when an audience is close upon me, as in a small theatre, is a direct prevention to good acting'; or that he was 'relapsing into my old habitual sin of striving for effect by dint of muscular exertion and not restraining my body, while my face and voice alone are allowed to act; or that 'I fail, when I allow my tongue and action to anticipate my thought.' As late as 1843, Macready was complaining about himself: 'the great defect of my style is hurry and want of clear discrimination . . . *I see how much of my conception I lose through precipitancy.*' He had the ideas—that was one of his distinguishing marks as an actor—but he could not always find the right shape for them. He noted in 1835 that Othello 'ought to be one of my best characters if I could realise my own conceptions'; as Macbeth in the same year, '*I cannot reach in execution the standard of my own conception*'; after playing Othello 'wretchedly' in 1836, 'I am perpetually *tortured* by my inability to realise my intentions.'

As a result, Macready was often out of touch with the audience—or was this, rather, the cause? He could not conquer them, as Kemble did, by simply *appearing*, or as Kean did, by frightening them. All too often, especially in the later years, he felt that he simply could not communicate with the beasts in front of him. Acting Hamlet in Charleston in 1844, 'I strove and fought up against what I thought the immobility of the audience; I would not be beaten cravenly, but such a performance is never satisfactory—at least to the actor. . . .' As Lear, in Edinburgh, he observed: 'it is slaughterous work to act these characters to these audiences.' As Hamlet, in Manchester, he explained: 'the inspiration is lost, the perfect *abandon*, under which one

goes out of one's self, is impossible unless you enjoy the perfect sympathy of an audience.' Approval of bad work was even worse than indifference to good: 'acted Posthumus in a most discreditable manner, undigested, unstudied . . . I was ashamed of myself. . . . The audience applauded, but they knew not what they did.' Too much should not be made of this barrier between actor and audience; Kemble and Kean despised the playgoers of their time no less, and might well have made very similar entries in *their* diaries; yet Macready seems to have lacked their power of personal *dominion*.

Yet if Macready did not always command the audience, or please himself, it was partly because of his unorthodox and somewhat experimental style of acting. He introduced a brand of naturalism which went a good deal further towards the behaviour of 'real life' than the 'natural' bursts of Kean, and was in sharp contrast to the formal tradition of Kemble which still served as the groundwork of English playing. For Hazlitt, in 1817, Macready was already 'too natural.' He struggled, for one thing, against the codes of traffic-signal gesture, trying to keep his body still and to act from the mind. According to Mr. Trewin, 'he would stand upright against a wall, pinion himself with a bandage, and repeat the most violent passages of Lear, Othello or Macbeth. . . .' He attempted to characterise Shakespearian verse rather than simply to declaim it—'I want to consider every line, and test each by a natural standard,' he wrote in 1833—and this brought him under heavy fire. R. H. Horne, for example, complained that 'he reads poetry very badly, as to rhythm—broken up—without melody—harsh—unmusical—shattered prose'; and Fanny Kemble grumbled that his

'natural style of speaking . . . was simply chopping it up into prose'. Yet Horne admitted that 'he speaks with exquisite distinctness, and very impressively, because he is thoroughly in earnest.' An American who objected because 'the sense alone directed the elocution'—a rare phenomenon, in those days—went on to say that 'no false note was ever struck, no shade of meaning was left undiscriminated, no measured or monotonous recitation ever wearied the ear.'

Macready was trying, moreover, to present not only impressive *pieces* of a character—but to give the man as a whole. 'The prescriptive criticism of this country,' as he himself complained, 'looks for particular points instead of contemplating an entire character.' Instead of acting from 'point' to 'point', instead of reserving his energies for 'bursts', lighting up lines or phrases and leaving the areas between in darkness, he continually attempted to fuse and kindle the whole text. He wanted to *be* the man he personated; and, like a good follower of Stanislavsky, he sought 'offered circumstances' to help him. Before going on as Shylock, it is said, he used to whip up his anger in the wings by cursing fiercely under his breath and violently shaking a ladder, and during the final fight in *Macbeth* he worked himself into a personal frenzy. 'I cannot act *Macbeth*,' he noted in his diary, 'without *being Macbeth*, which I must have time to prepare my mind for.' Quite often, this identification was complete enough to satisfy him ('I was good; I was the character; I felt it'). Then he felt 'free from effort, prompt and spontaneous in my passion, with complete absence of all muscular exertion . . . (with) that *certainly* of preserving the *tout ensemble*.' He was, as he said, 'possessed.' He could not, like more

experienced actors, secure such feelings of certainty and relaxation by the exercise of technique alone; and he attributed this deficiency, and other weaknesses in his acting, to his comparatively late entry on the stage. 'In comparing my performances with my rehearsals, when I frequently speak and act with an abandonment and a reality that surprises me, I feel the great advantage which Kean, Miss O'Neill and Mrs. Siddons enjoyed in passing their earliest years upon the stage, and thereby obtaining a power of identification only to be so acquired.'

One of the most conspicuous aspects of Macready's relative naturalism was his emphasis on the humanity and domesticity of his more sympathetic characters: he insisted that they, too, were happily married men and loving fathers, on the best pattern of the early Victorian middle class. 'No feature of this actor was more especially his own,' said Westland Marston, 'than the sudden yet natural infusion into his more heroic vein of some homely touch of truth which gave reality to the scene.' Sheridan Knowles gave him particular scope for such 'homely touches', in *Virginius* and *William Tell*. To Leigh Hunt, writing of his King John in 1830, Macready seemed 'best where he approaches domestic passion and has to give way to soft or overwhelming emotions. His greatest deficiency is shown in passages where the ideal is required; where nature puts on the robe of art, and speaks her truths, as it were, in art.' Yet it is notable that this was the best King John in Hunt's experience: 'not that it was so kingly as John Kemble's (or what he thought kingly, for he was a King John of his own, in a way) but because his was more like the real historical King John . . . less poetical than petulant and a bully.'

Macready had, indeed, many virtues. Although he was not handsome, he could assume good looks; and as he grew older, it was easier for him to play juveniles—thus, he triumphed as Ion at forty-three, and as Melnotte at forty-nine. In the latter part, said a colleague, ‘when playing to a good house, he did not look more than twenty-five’; and G. H. Lewes witnessed that ‘None of the young men whom I have seen play Claude Melnotte had the youthfulness of Macready in that part.’ He excelled in both pathos and villainy, in the domestic and the supernatural, in physical and intellectual combat. Although he lacked Kean’s skill in fencing, his duelling in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* was famous in his day; and, as his Richelieu showed, ‘he was at home in finesse and strategy, and in all that involved intellectual gladiatorship.’ He suffered well. He was impressive in anger. He had wide emotional sympathies and acute human insight, inside his range of characters, and his range was wide—much wider than Kean’s or Kemble’s. This may be seen from a list of his most popular roles (in order of public favour), published in 1850 in the *Theatrical Journal*: Werner, Richelieu, Iago, Iachimo, William Tell, Virginius, King of the Commons (James V of Scotland, in a romantic drama of that name), King Lear, King John, Cassius, Kiteley and Hamlet. Among other successful roles were Macbeth, Leontes, Wolsey, Henry IV and Benedick; Ion, Rob Roy, Oakley in *The Jealous Wife*, Melantius in *The Bridal* (adapted by Knowles from Beaumont and Fletcher) and Joseph Surface in *The School for Scandal* (a part he later disliked so much that he made it a condition of his contract with Bunn in 1835 that he should not be obliged to play it). Although he could not equal Garrick’s mastery of comedy, he was not—

like Kean and Kemble—a single-track player. His choice of new roles was, moreover, generous and catholic. However Macready might enrage and insult the authors, he did more for the contemporary drama of his time than any starring actor before or since.

As Werner, Macready won fame by his command of pathos—‘almost as remarkable,’ said Lewes, ‘as the heroic agony of Kean’s Othello.’ There was a famous moment when his son Ulric, who has committed a murder, defends himself by accusing his father of leading him astray, with the line:

Who proclaimed to me

That there were crimes made venial by the occasion?

Macready had already indicated Werner’s sense of guilt ‘by the convulsions of the face, by the hands, that first sought to close the ears, and then to beat back the fatal sounds that would enter.’ At Ulric’s line he produced, says Westland Marston, ‘one of those rare effects which become traditions of the theatre. With a shrill cry of agony, as if pierced mortally by a dart, he bounded from his seat, and then, as if all strength had failed him, wavered and fluttered forward, so to speak, till he sank on one knee in front of the stage.’ The fact that he could breathe life into Byron’s play, wrote William Archer, appeared to him ‘one of the most convincing proofs that he was really a great actor.’

In the greatest roles, Macready was faulted by G. H. Lewes for his lack of grandeur and heroic passion. As Macbeth, he was acclaimed for his dagger-scene; for his retreat in terror at the appearance of Banquo’s ghost; for the final fight (‘He turned upon Fate and stood at bay.’) ‘Nothing could be finer,’ Lewes wrote, ‘than the indi-

cations he gave of a conscience wavering under the influence of "fate and metaphysical aid", superstitious, and weakly cherishing the suggestions of superstition; but nothing could have been less heroic than his presentation of the great criminal. He was fretful and impatient under the provocations of his wife; he was ignoble under the terrors of remorse; he stole into the sleeping-chamber of Duncan like a man going to purloin a purse, not like a warrior going to snatch a crown.' Is Macready's way, as described by Lewes, not a legitimate interpretation? Yes, but Macready was not trying to give it: he himself aimed at the portrait of 'one living to command,' a strong, heroic man.

As Lear, however, Lewes acknowledged that Macready was, indeed, 'great.' Instead of being feeble and senile from the opening scene, this Lear was 'a hale and zealous hunter', who grew old as the play went on. He was, moreover, kingly, showing in his gait a 'primitive, half-savage royalty.' In Lear's madness Macready found, as Archer observed, 'ample scope for that subtlety of psychological suggestion which was one of his great qualities': 'the keen, over-eager attention, the sudden diversion to new excitements, the light garrulousness, the unmeaning smiles, or the abstracted silence, denoted by turns so many shifting moods of fantasy through which one torturing recollection, like a knell . . . broke ever and anon.' When it came to the recognition of Cordelia and, for the first time, her death upon the stage, he stirred the whole house with emotion: 'Who can ever forget the storm of sighs and tears which shook the audience?' asked one witness.

It was in his voice that Macready had the advantage over Kean, Kemble and, indeed, most of England's great

actors. In his early days it was, Hunt said, 'the finest and most heroical on the stage'. Hazlitt extolled it as 'magnificent . . . powerful and flexible, varying with the greatest facility from the lowest to the highest pitch. . . .' Miss Mitford admired, in 1824, its 'very exquisite music (except when he rants).' Although it may have deteriorated, as Macready grew older and amended his acting style, his voice still remained—in Lewes's words—'powerful, extensive in compass, capable of delicate modulation in quiet passages (though with a tendency to scream in violent passages) and having tones that thrilled and tones that stirred tears.' Unlike Kean, who had to be seen in close-up to be fully understood, Macready was fully intelligible at a distance—'you may gather how he must look by what you hear.'

Was he, indeed, a great actor? Against him is the evidence of Hazlitt, with his damning verdict: 'Macready has talents and a magnificent voice, but he is, I fear, too improving an actor to be a man of genius. That little ill-looking vagabond Kean never improved in anything.' But Macready, like Kemble, has suffered from the literary excellence of Hazlitt and Hunt, who put their faith in Kean. It is by Hazlitt's testimony, in particular, that Macready has been judged. Yet it concerns only the early part of his career, and even here there are such witnesses in the other camp as Tieck, who thought Macready superior to both Kean and Kemble. Better evidence comes from G. H. Lewes, who saw Macready in his maturity. He was, Lewes decided, 'a man of talent, but of talent so marked and individual that it approaches very near to genius.' Comparisons with Kean are, of course, inevitable. Macready refused to play Sir Giles Overreach or Sir

Edward Mortimer, yet he triumphed as Richard III, Iago was one of his most successful roles, and he may be said to have surpassed Kean in both Lear and Hamlet. Kean, on the other hand, failed dismally in Macready's successes, and persistently refused to appear with him on the stage. 'I don't mind Young,' he wrote to the manager of Drury Lane, 'but I will not act with Macready . . . Fabius Maximus conquered not by fighting a powerful enemy, but by avoiding him. He weakened his resources, and saved the city of Rome.' Not until the very end of his career did Kean agree to appear as Othello to Macready's Iago. He was, said Lewes, 'puny' beside Macready until the third act. Then he moved towards Iago with 'a gouty hobble, seized him by the throat, and in a well-known explosion, "Villain! be sure you prove," &c seemed to swell into a stature which made Macready appear small.' That has been taken as a demonstration of Kean's superiority; yet can we measure the other man's greatness by one 'burst'? Kean himself was clearly well aware of the danger presented by Macready. Summing up their differences, J. C. Trewin writes: 'Kean, in a small group of parts, might surpass him and any actor that ever lived. Macready had a wider range, the longer list of successes. He was always very close to the top. Kean's record was a fever-chart with impenetrable depths.' William Archer rightly suggests, in addition, that 'Kean was a greater actor, but not so great an artist.' As Macready himself said, 'If I am to excel it must be by consistent labour. . . . I wish to play what I have to do in an artist-like manner.' Sometimes the labour showed; yet it bore a rich harvest, for himself and the English stage. I answer with Lewes: 'Yes, Macready *was* a great actor. Though not a man of genius, he was a man of intellect,

of culture, of representative talent, with decided physical advantages, capable of depicting a wide range of unheroic characters with truth and power, an ornament to his profession, the pride of his friends, and the favourite of the public.' He was a great actor not only because of what he did to the audience, but because of what he did for the theatre. He was a great actor in spite of himself.

SIR HENRY IRVING

WHEN the orchestra began the overture, less than half the shabby red-and-gold theatre was filled with frock-coated first-nighters. It was a cold Saturday evening, and the opening farce, *Is He Jealous?*, deepened the gloom. By a quarter to eight, when the act-drop rose on the main play in the programme, a few more people had arrived; but most of that scanty mid-Victorian audience were expecting the worst. The last two plays had failed, and it looked as if the new piece, *The Bells*, was going to follow them into oblivion. It was adapted from a Parisian success, but only twelve nights earlier another version of the same play had failed dismally at another London playhouse; and here the leading role of a murderer was to be played by a young comedian! The critics thought they knew what was coming, and had their epitaphs ready. Yet another manager was going to be defeated by this 'unlucky' theatre in the Strand—the old Lyceum. That is what the audience thought, on this night of November 25, 1871, and their pessimism was shared by the manager and his company—until about eight o'clock.

The act-drop rose on the burgomaster's inn in Alsace, a quiet domestic interior filled with local colour and small talk in what one first-nighter described as 'that strange language—English in translation.' It was Christmas Eve, and everyone was waiting for Mathias, the burgomaster.

Outside it was snowing; there were gusts of wind and an undercurrent of atmospheric music; and the rising storm reminded the people at the inn of a wild Christmas Eve fifteen years before, when a Polish Jew had mysteriously disappeared nearby. They found only his bloodstained cloak, his cap, and his dead sleigh-horse. Neither the body nor the murderer, they said, had ever been discovered, but half the audience—having read the press's account of the Erckmann-Chatrian original—was already well acquainted with the secret. Fifteen minutes went by. The critics yawned and fidgeted. Then the 'hurry' music whirled up into a crescendo. A door at the back was suddenly flung open. And out of the storm stepped a tall, thin, commanding figure in a fur cap and heavy, snow-covered coat, waving his whip in greeting. Simply, if superfluously, he announced in ringing tones: 'It is I!' or rather 'Tz I!' Mathias the burgomaster had come home. Throwing off his coat and cap, he moved downstage to a chair and started to take off his gaiters. Without knowing why, the audience found that they could not keep their eyes away from him. Henry Irving had already begun to cast his spell.

As he took off his gaiters, the conversation turned to a 'clever Parisian' in a neighbouring village who could send people to sleep. 'What is more', says one of the men in the inn, 'when they are asleep they tell him everything that weighs upon their conscience.' At the word 'conscience,' Mathias was buckling up his shoe. Then, said Gordon Craig, 'we suddenly saw these fingers stop their work; the crown on the head suddenly seemed to glitter and become frozen—and then, at the pace of the slowest and most terrified snail, the two hands, still motionless and dead,

were seen to be coming up the side of the leg . . . the whole torso of the man, almost seeming frozen, was gradually, and by an almost imperceptible movement, seen to be drawing up and back, as it would straighten a little, and to lean a little against the back of the chair. . . . Fear spread out across the audience. Then Mathias recovered; the spell was broken; and the domestic gossip was continued. But a few minutes later it happened again. The burgomaster was sitting at the table when someone mentioned the disappearance of the Polish Jew. He was just raising a glass of wine to his lips. He stopped, lowered it, and pretended with great deliberation to pick out a piece of cork. At that moment, far away, there was the sound of jingling sleigh-bells. Gradually the sound grew louder. Only Mathias, it was plain, could hear it, and the audience saw his eyes fill with guilt and horror. This is how Gordon Craig described the scene, as Irving played it in later years. 'He moves his head slowly from us—the eyes still somehow with us—and moves it to the right—taking as long as a long journey to discover the truth takes. He looks to the faces on the right—nothing. Slowly the head revolves back again, down, and along the tunnels of thought and sorrow, and at the end the face and eyes are bent upon those to the left of him . . . utter stillness . . . nothing there either—every one is concerned with his or her little doings—smoking or knitting or unravelling wool or scraping a plate slowly and silently. A long pause, endless, breaking our hearts, comes down over everything, and on and on go these bells.' Mathias rose to his feet—'never has any one seen another rising figure which slid slowly up like that'—and asked the others if they had not heard the sound of sleigh-bells. None of them knew what he was talking about,

and he began to shiver, his jaws chattering, visibly ill with fright.

When Mathias was left alone, a few moments later, the bells went on jingling; the stage darkened; and then the sound suddenly stopped. There above him, through a gauze, was a vision of snow-covered country, with a lime-kiln burning, and the Polish Jew standing on a sleigh drawn by a horse with bells in its harness. Following the sleigh was a man in a brown blouse with an axe in his hand. Suddenly the apparition of the murdered man turned his face round and fixed his eyes upon the burgomaster. With a shriek of terror Mathias fell to the floor—and the Lyceum curtain thudded down on the first act. There was a burst of applause from the audience, yet Irving's success was not yet assured: they were mesmerised but mystified. In the second act Mathias could be seen putting a smiling face upon his secret torment, in the preparations for his daughter's wedding, and the actor displayed his talents for pathos, tenderness and subtlety in characterisation. But it was in the third act that he triumphed. Mathias dreams that he is on trial, is put under hypnosis to reveal the truth, and re-lives in ghastly detail what happened on the night of the murder. In a masterly sequence of prolonged mime, Irving enacted the murderer's greed and fear, taking the audience with him as he walked, in imagination, over the snow-covered fields, heard the bells of the sleigh approaching, cut down the Jew with his hatchet, seized his belt of gold, and tipped the body into the lime-kiln. 'Go into the fire, Jew, go into the fire,' he shouted eerily, pushing feverishly at the body with a pole. Then he cried out, covering his face with his hands, and staggering down the stage: 'Those eyes, oh those eyes! How he glares at me!' Still in his dream, Mathias fell asleep,

was woken by the mesmerist, and—in rage and agony—heard the court pronounce the death sentence. The stage darkened, and the lights went up again on the burgo-master's bedroom. It was his daughter's wedding day, and they were knocking at his door to waken him. When he made no answer, they burst the door open; and out through the curtains round his bed staggered Mathias, his face chalk-white with fear, his fingers scrabbling at his throat. In a strangled voice he croaked, 'Take the rope from my neck, take the rope from my neck!' His eyes rolled upwards; his gaunt limbs stiffened; and he sank, with a choked scream, into the arms of his wife. The death sentence had been carried out: the play was over.

It was, as one first nighter said, 'almost hideously painful'; at least one spectator fainted; but the audience loved it. They had been terrified into submission. 'We did not at first understand a word; we did not understand his walk; nor any of his movements; but he gripped us, he interested us, he excited us, and the excitement increased and increased, until, when the last curtain fell, we could only sit, gasping, stunned and silent. But after a moment we leapt to our feet, we leapt on to the benches, we shouted, we waved handkerchiefs, caps, anything that could be waved, and we then and there consecrated Irving the greatest actor of our time.' He had brought a public execution to the stage; and was to re-enact it over eight hundred times during the next thirty years, throughout Britain and America.

The evening, however, was not yet over: there was still another piece on the programme, with another part for Henry Irving. The agonised murderer of *The Bells* now appeared, after a short interval, as the seedy rascal of *Pickwick*, Mr. Alfred Jingle. With a black beaver tipped

over one eye, his lanky figure dressed in shabby, tight-fitting, black clothes, his swaggering walk and staccato speech, Irving seemed to many people the very incarnation of that famous Cockney grotesque, with the 'indescribable air of jaunty impudence and perfect self-possession' that his creator described. 'One would have thought,' noted one admirer, 'that Dickens must have seen him first and then put him into *Pickwick Papers*.' *Pickwick* and the others faded into insignificance beside this sardonic silhouette. Irving had already appeared in the role, for a longer version of *Pickwick* had preceded *The Bells*; but he had upset the balance by the vividness of his acting, and the play had been as unsuccessful as most dramatisations of Dickens. Now, cut down from eleven to seven scenes, it gave him the opportunity to show that he could not only make the audience shiver but make it laugh as well.

When the final curtain fell, on the unmasking of Mr. Jingle in Mr. Nupkins's library, there was a great ovation for Irving. The Lyceum, it was plain, had been saved, and a new star was shining in the theatrical firmament. The foyer buzzed with excitement as the theatre emptied, and back to their offices went some forty critics to describe the night's events. At a small supper party, arranged by some friends in his honour, Irving exulted in his victory. His wife Florence, who did not approve of his theatrical friends or sympathise with his theatrical ambitions, sat apart in cold detachment, but Irving—accustomed to such wifely glumness after only two years of marriage—did not notice. In the cab going home, still elated, he said: 'Well, my dear, we too shall soon have our own carriage and pair!' Mrs. Irving, who had said so little all evening, now said too much. 'Are you going on making a fool of yourself like this

all your life?', she asked, in a burst of anger. At once Irving told the driver to stop. Without a word to his wife, he got out of the cab. He did not go home that night, and he never spoke to her again. In this way, it may be said, his private life ended on the very night that his public life began, on that remarkable night of November 25, 1871 which made Henry Irving the leader of the English stage.

Henry Irving was born on February 6, 1838 in the Somersetshire village of Keinton Mandeville, and spent most of his childhood in an atmosphere of rural peace and rigid piety. His baptismal name was John Henry Brodribb. At his birth his father, Samuel Brodribb, was a travelling salesman for the village store, but business was so bad that within a few years the Brodribbs decided to try their luck in Bristol. For the sake of their only child, however, they left him behind in the country, until they could make a secure home for him in town. That, at least, was their intention, but the temporary separation became a permanent estrangement. At the age of four, John Henry was handed over to his mother's sister, Sarah Penberthy; and under her strict but loving supervision he grew up in the Cornish mining village of Halsetown, seeing his parents for a few days every year. Educated at a dame school, he supplemented this scanty schooling by his own intense reading of the only three books in the house—the Bible, *Don Quixote*, and a book of ballads. From an early age, he cherished a secret love of 'play-acting', although his aunt—like his mother—was convinced that all theatres were under the special charge of the Devil. This appetite for forbidden fruit was encouraged, so he recalled in later life, by a glimpse of the famous lion-tamer Van Amburgh driving

a team of twenty-four horses in royal state through the streets of Bristol. Not until he was ten was he reunited with his father and mother, and then it was only on the grounds of economic necessity; his uncle Isaac died suddenly, leaving his family in some distress, and there was no longer a home for Johnnie Brodribb in Halsetown. It was to his aunt and not to his mother, however, that he looked for help and sympathy during the struggles of adolescence and early manhood. Mother and son were kept apart, and finally separated, by the son's growing interest in the stage.

At the age of ten, young Brodribb was plunged from the Cornish moors into the heart of London: his father had found work and accommodation as the caretaker of a house in Broad Street. This nervous, dreamy child, with a serious impediment in his West Country speech, found himself among strangers at home and at school. He was lucky, however, in discovering a headmaster with a passion for elocution, who helped him to defeat not only his stutter but his mother. It was under pressure from Dr. Pinches that Mrs. Brodribb reluctantly agreed to let her son enter a house of Satan—to see Samuel Phelps play Hamlet. The theatre was Sadler's Wells, where Macready's disciple had set up as actor-manager in 1843—it was one of the most immediate and important effects of abolishing the old patents—and where during the next twenty years he presented nearly all Shakespeare's plays, winning a special place in the history of the English stage. Young Brodribb's initiation into this world, coupled with his encouragement in public reciting at school, inflamed his ambitions. Not long afterwards, at the age of twelve, he began to earn his living, in order to supplement the family funds—first as a junior clerk in the office of a Cheapside lawyer, and then

with an East India merchant—and spent any pennies he could scrape together on secret visits to Sadler's Wells. With the same determination that he had overcome his stutter, the young clerk set out to train himself for the stage. He learned plays by heart. He practised, alone and at a school of elocution, which sometimes arranged semi-public performances to which it invited the press. He took fencing lessons in Chancery Lane. He schooled his body in tests of endurance, and tried to discipline its clumsiness into grace. Every morning before he went to the office he walked to the Islington home of William Hoskins, one of Phelps's leading actors at the Wells, who gave the boy private tuition in the ABC of the stage. In order to pay for all this, Brodribb went without food, and this deliberate semi-starvation told on him in later life. 'It is strange how one never entirely makes up for not having had quite enough to eat in one's youth,' he said many years afterwards, at the height of his fame. He also, it may be, never made up for not having had quite enough love: this self-education was continued in the face of bitter opposition from his mother.

When Hoskins decided to go to Australia, he gave his pupil the chance of coming with him; when Brodribb (then 17) refused this generous offer, he introduced the boy to Phelps, who offered him a job at the Wells; yet although this might have seemed a heaven-sent opportunity to most stage-struck youths, Brodribb did not accept. He knew, it seems, that he was not yet ready for such a company. Awkward and inexperienced, he needed the training that could only be won in the provinces; but how was he to get a foothold there, without even the money for his own wigs? The following year, in 1856, his opportunity came out of

the blue, when a kindly uncle gave him £100. Brodribb invested most of it in wigs, swords and other indispensable accessories, and bought himself the part of Romeo in an amateurs' production at the Soho Theatre (for a few guineas any aspiring novice could take this way of testing himself on the stage). Satisfied with the result, he wrote to E. D. Davis, an influential theatre manager in the north, enclosing a letter of recommendation which Hoskins had left behind; Davis offered him an engagement (unpaid) with his Sunderland stock company the following month; and Brodribb set off for his new career, with the remainder of his uncle's money in his pocket, and in his heart the knowledge that to his mother he was not only a bad son but a damned soul. Mrs. Brodribb never forgave him; his success in such evil courses only made his sin the greater in her eyes; and his later career may well be interpreted, in some respects, as a sustained attempt to prove that his mother was wrong in setting up the church against the stage, and in writing off actors as men without God.

The tall, solemn, lanky clerk began his new life with a new name: he took it, symbolically enough, both from a preacher and an artist, whose sermons and stories had figured largely in his life in Halsetown—Edward Irving and Washington Irving. It was as Henry Irving that he made his professional debut on the stage of the Theatre Royal, Sunderland, on September 29, 1856, in *Richelieu*. As the Duke of Orleans, he opened the play with the line: 'Here's to our enterprise!', and in the oriental pantomime that followed he appeared as a cook. (He did not take the name of Irving officially, by royal licence, until his fiftieth birthday.) During those first weeks, he found out—in hard and humiliating labour—how very much he had to learn. He

sang in opera, he danced in burlesque, he walked on in dozens of plays. Yet in spite of his clumsiness and inexperience, he was kept in the company, and by the end of his first season he was even being *paid*—at the rate of twenty-five shillings a week. In January, 1857 Irving went to the Edinburgh Theatre Royal, as a first walking gentleman (here, too, he began as the Duke of Orleans in *Richelieu*), and was soon promoted to be a juvenile lead (at thirty shillings a week).

During the next ten years, Henry Irving worked in the stock companies of England, Scotland and Ireland, inching his way up the ladder, learning and developing all the while. Day and night, with scarcely a break during the season, the work went on: studying, rehearsing and playing, in a triple bill that was usually changed every evening. At Edinburgh he once had to learn 17 new parts in 30 days (and he was always conscientious about make-up and costume), and in two and a half years there he played over 400 roles, ranging the gamut of a stock company's repertoire, taking the measure of many visiting stars from London. He was fiercely in earnest, and ready for any drudgery, but by the autumn of 1859 it seemed as if his provincial apprenticeship were over: he was enlisted in Augustus Harris's company at the Princess's Theatre, London. Within a few weeks, however, Irving's high hopes were dashed. Realising that he was only exchanging one treadmill for another, he asked Harris to release him from his contract. This was a big setback, but it taught him a painful lesson: he would not leave the provinces until the right offer came from London. He had to wait a long time before that offer arrived. Meanwhile, he practised, studied and, on occasion, suffered. The London fiasco was followed by a visit to Dublin, where

Irving was shouted down every night by a section of the audience, inspired by hooligans in the pay of his predecessor in the company. This ordeal lasted for three weeks, and left many scars. Thereafter he acted in Glasgow, Manchester, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Liverpool and other cities, rising to a salary of £3 a week. By 1866, his tenth year in the profession, he was disillusioned, frustrated and penniless.

Then, without warning, the tide turned. During one of his increasingly frequent periods of unemployment, Irving was asked by the well-known dramatist Dion Boucicault to appear at Manchester in his new play *The Two Loves of Mary Leigh*. As the villainous Rawdon Scudamore, Irving made a hit, and it was largely on his account that the play was brought to London—to the St. James's—with Irving as both leading man and stage manager. Under the new title of *Hunted Down* it was put into rehearsal in September, but when it became clear that it would not be ready in time for the theatre's opening Louisa Herbert, the actress who ran the St. James's, decided to start the season with the eighteenth century comedy of *The Belle's Stratagem*, in which Irving took the lead as Doricourt. He aroused no interest until the brief scene where this man about town feigns madness in order to avoid a marriage; but here the play was interrupted by a prolonged ovation, which was repeated every night of the run. In November came the first night of *Hunted Down*, on which Irving had set his hopes. When the curtain fell on the last scene, George Eliot said to her friend G. H. Lewes; 'Well, what do you think of him?' 'In twenty years he will be at the head of the English stage,' Lewes answered. 'He is there, I think, already,' the great novelist replied. But for some time to come the name of Irving meant, to the public at large, the light comedian

Joseph Irving. It was another five years before Henry Irving justified the promise of Rawdon Scudamore. During those years his namesake Joseph died, removing a shadow from his career; but his private life was darkened by three other deaths—of his mother, still unreconciled; of Nellie Moore, a girl he had hoped to make his wife; and of his first and only marriage.

The very success of his Scudamore fixed Irving, for a time, in the rut of stage villainy; but with the help of his lifelong friend J. L. Toole, the leading comic actor of the day, he broke free and emerged in 1870 as a light comedian and character actor with two semi-Dickensian portraits. The first of these was the Dombey-like role of Mr. Chevenix in H. J. Byron's *Uncle Dick's Darling*; and influenced by this performance (and, perhaps, by the memory of William Dorrit) an obscure young dramatist wrote a new play with a part for Irving. As Digby Grant in James Albery's *Two Roses*, one of the most popular and distinguished plays of the late Victorian theatre, Irving scored a personal triumph. He appeared as a vain, selfish, snobbish man: in poverty, smugly trading on his friends' good nature; in wealth, paying off his obligations with a cheque-book. Long after Irving's death, he was remembered as Digby Grant 'in the shabby old dressing-gown, his heart bursting with self-adulation, handing to each of his former friends, with superb condescension, "a little cheque". . . .' It was *Two Roses* which led Irving to his destiny at the Lyceum. His performance of Digby Grant—praised at the time for its modern subtlety and naturalism—may seem to be remote from the romantic melodrama of *The Bells*; but on Irving's benefit night, near the end of the play's ten-month run, the actor surprised the audience by appearing in evening dress and

reciting Thomas Hood's well-known poem about a conscience-stricken murderer, *The Dream of Eugene Aram*. This sombre piece was one of Irving's favourites, and he delivered it with a power and intensity that roused the theatre to a storm of applause. Sitting in the audience that night was an American manager, 'Colonel' Hezekiah Bateman, who was planning a new venture in London. He was leasing the Lyceum Theatre in order to launch his youngest daughter Isabel as an actress—her sisters Kate and Virginia were already established in the profession—and he was so impressed by Irving's two performances that he immediately offered him a three-year contract as leading man. Irving accepted, with his usual shrewdness, on condition that Bateman produced *The Bells*.

After Irving's triumph as Mathias and Jingle, parts were difficult to find. Living dramatists were, in the 1870's, more than usually scarce, and the greatest of the dead was out of bounds, for Shakespearian drama was in the doldrums. Yet Irving never faltered and never failed. First of all, he found a new stable-mate for Mathias in the old farce of *Raising the Wind*: with Alfred Jingle and Robert Macaire, Jeremy Diddler formed one of a trinity of jaunty, stylish, seedy rogues whom Irving delighted to play. For the next season, the new house-dramatist of the Lyceum, W. G. Wills, wrote a play—at Irving's suggestion—which exhibited him as a martyr king. Although *Charles I* was little more than a string of domestic scenes from the sentimentalised life of that unhappy Stuart, it gave the Lyceum's leading man an opportunity to demonstrate his range. Modelling his make-up on the Van Dyck portraits, he appeared with royal dignity, sweetness, pathos and saintliness, persecuted by a cardboard-ruffian Cromwell.

Again under sentence of death, his execution was carried out offstage; but his final curtain line of 'Remember!', as he went off to the scaffold, reduced many of the audience to tears—not only on the first night but for years to come. This great success was followed in the next season by a new version of the story of Eugene Aram, already familiar through Hood's poem and Lytton's novel. Under Irving's guidance, W. G. Wills created another portrait of a guilty and remorseful man, living—like Mathias—under the shadow of a murder he had committed many years before, and exposed just as he is on the verge of finding happiness in marriage. Once again, as in *The Bells*, nature forestalls the law, and Irving scored in Aram's death agonies: he died in the churchyard at daybreak, in the arms of his beloved, while a choir was heard offstage. As in *The Bells*, it was in showing the *mind* of a murderer that Irving excelled; but in spite of the similarities in *genre*, admirers noted that there was not a jot of Mathias in Aram. Next, in the season of 1873-4, Irving turned—at Bateman's insistence—to a 'classic' test-piece, by challenging the memory of Macready and Phelps in *Richelieu*. Breaking clean away from the tradition, he remade the character in his own individual way, with subtle humour and austere authority. 'Nature designed him for a prince of the church', said William Archer in later life, and *Richelieu* was the first of his three triumphs in theatrical holy orders.

It was only now that Henry Irving dared to attempt the great Shakespearian roles, and then it was against the strong opposition of his manager. When he insisted on playing Hamlet, Bateman would allow him only £100 for the production. For Irving, at 36, it was 'now or never.' If he was to fulfil his ambitions, he could not be content with

applause in melodrama. To fail would be disastrous: he staked his all on victory. From his first appearance, on the night of October 31st, 1874, this Prince of Denmark took the audience by surprise. Dispensing with the usual trappings and suits of woe, Irving wore a black, fur-trimmed tunic, short and elegant, relieved only by a gold chain round his neck; underneath his raven-black hair, his handsome face was very pale but composed, not set in studied grief; and instead of framing his performance around the traditional 'points', he behaved with highly unorthodox naturalism and understatement. Instead of being terrified by the ghost, he questioned it with eager confidence. Instead of jeering at Polonius, he mocked him with courteous humour. Here was a gentlemanly, thoughtful, *thinking* prince, who had not been seen before upon the stage; and in the first two acts, indeed, was 'so simple, so quiet, so free from the exhibition of actors' artifices' (as Ellen Terry said) that the audience was puzzled and unresponsive. Not until the nunnery scene did Irving break down that barrier between stage and stalls with the overpowering intensity of his tirade against women, marked by a vibrant underlying tenderness; and the actor's fate was settled at the end of the play-scene. As the King and Queen hurried off in confusion, Hamlet jumped up with a shout of triumph and threw himself in the King's chair. Leaping up again, and swaying in half-hysterical exultation, he clutched Ophelia's fan of peacock feathers and began to chant:

For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself, and now reigns here
A very, very . . .

Here he paused, looked at the fan, and then finished the line with a shriek of 'pajock' (or peacock), flinging away the fan as he spoke. It brought the house down on that first night, and on nearly every other night that Irving played the Prince of Denmark. 'However prepared you were for it,' said one admirer, many years later, 'though you knew it must come, its thrill was never lessened, the shock hit you and lifted you out of your seat.' From that moment the success of Irving's gamble was assured. When the curtain fell at last, after midnight, the clapping and cheering was in homage to a great actor who had climbed his Everest. It was a victory not only for Irving, but also for his profession and for Shakespeare.

Hamlet broke all records by running for 200 performances (a total not yet eclipsed). During its run 'Colonel' Bateman died, but his widow continued to manage the Lyceum, and his daughters continued to act with Irving, who went on to tackle three more Shakespearian peaks. He did not master either his *Macbeth*, a craven, Caledonian Aram who welcomed death as an escape from his conscience, or his *Othello*, a bronzed, tenor-voiced, Venetian general not to the taste of playgoers accustomed to turbaned basses in blackface. But his Richard of Gloucester, created in January, 1877, was another triumph for Irving. Discarding the stock hump and the butcher's scowl, he assumed that aura of royalty which he could wear so well. 'Where,' asked Tennyson, 'did he get that *Plantagenet* look?' The answer is: from the same place that he took his *Stuart* look in *Charles I*—from the make-up box of his mind. Here, noted one critic, was 'the prince, the statesman, the courtier', yet this 'gentleman-villain' was nonetheless coldly and fearfully malignant, a panther who in war

changed into a lion. 'Weird, sinister, sardonic, all in turn and all together,' Irving was a 'splendidly satanic' Crookback; and he was, moreover, Shakespeare's Crookback. For the first time most of the original text was restored, and Cibber's claptrap was jettisoned at last.

Irving now deserted Shakespeare for a while at the Lyceum, and revived two successes of Charles Kean, eclipsing him in both. In *The Lyons Mail*, adapted by Charles Reade from a Parisian success, he achieved one of those doubles so dear to Victorian playgoers—as Lesurques, an innocent man who is wrongly accused of murder, and as Dubosc, the true culprit. Here was no genteel villain, but a cold-blooded, swaggering brute with a devilry all his own: Irving *lived* Dubosc, it seemed, just as he lived Richelieu. After rifling his victim's body, James Agate recalled, he would 'first wipe his hands wet with blood on the horse's flank, and then pat the animal's neck,' humming a few bars of the *Marseillaise*; he prepared to watch the execution of Lesurques with every appearance of drunken, sardonic enjoyment; and, when he is discovered at the last moment, fought like a fury against the avenging mob. Although Dubosc became one of Irving's most popular roles, ('a masterpiece of riotous diablerie', Henry Arthur Jones called it) other artists—including Ellen Terry—thought it an easy victory. It was Lesurques, they said, which was the *tour de force*. To act good men on the stage is always difficult, and 'to play a good man sincerely, as he did here,' wrote Ellen Terry, 'to show that double thing, the look of guilt which an innocent man wears when accused of crime, requires great acting. . . .'

After *The Lyons Mail*, Irving revived another of Charles Kean's Parisian imports—*Louis XI*, which gave him

another opportunity for villainy on the grand scale, and for a demonstration of the death throes in which he excelled and delighted. His great achievement, indeed, was—according to one actor—‘to die slowly from the beginning of his performance to the end, and to give that death a spiritual significance.’ Irving showed a despotic old king—cruel, hypocritical, cowardly, querulous and senile—on his way to the tomb, in what Laurence Irving describes as ‘the most elaborate and subtle’ of all his stage portraits. Here is one of the climaxes, described by H. M. Walbrook, at the end of the fourth act.

‘Seated in his chair in the gloomy room lit only by a single candle, and still mumbling his superstitions and his hates, he presently looked up and saw his enemy standing before him dim and ominous. He seemed to shrink into himself; and the following dialogue ensued:

Louis: Ne-mours! Mer-ci-ful God!

Nemours: Not a word!

Louis: Si-lence! Si-lence! Mer-cy! Mer-cy!

The King breathed each syllable in a long whisper as in a paroxysm of fear . . . Followed as it was by the wretched man’s shrieks, prayers, grovellings, and final collapse to the floor, the curtain used to fall amid a veritable thunder of applause.’

In the fifth act, Louis’s end came at last. Into the throne-room tottered the tall, ashen-faced old man, dressed in the blue velvet robes of state, with a huge golden crown on his head, grey hair streaming over his shoulders, clutching the royal sceptre. He staggered forward, using his sceptre as a staff, and then dropped it as he was helped on to a couch. Once there, Irving began perhaps the most remarkable of all his

public deaths. 'With extraordinary elaborated graduations of insensibility, violently interrupted by spasms of vigour,' noted Edward Russell, 'he gradually loses his consciousness. No physical detail is neglected that can help to realize a sinking of mind and body into annihilating death. The voice and articulation have the weird, half-drunken thickness of paralysis. Even the effect observable in age and sickness of drawing the retreating lips in over the sunken teeth is somewhat simulated. . . . Perhaps the greatest success of all is the still and silent impassibility into which the king sinks so absolutely that the courtiers and his son suppose it to be death. The actual death is not placid. The king struggles on his feet, and falls forward on a cushion, with his head toward the audience, as the low murmur, 'The King is dead, long live the King', proclaims the close. . . .'

It is worth noting that Irving's make-up was slight: 'except for a waxen pallor and two 'blacked out' teeth he looked much as usual' offstage, says Graham Robertson in his admirable book *Time Was*. Louis was, moreover, 'a sort of holiday part to him' (according to his manager); Ellen Terry declares that he could have played it 'on his head' three times a day; and Graham Robertson records that 'at the fall of the curtain he would rise up perfectly fresh and slip at once out of the part as he would have put off a coat, while out of the death trance of Mathias he would come half dazed, cold, breathless and trembling.'

In spite of his triumphs in the early 1870's, Irving felt that his progress was being checked by conditions at the Lyceum under the Bateman regime, notably by the weakness of the company and, in particular, of his leading lady, Isabel Bateman. He wanted to manage his own

theatre, yet he was bound to the Batemans by ties of grateful friendship. When Isabel fell in love with him, unrequited, his future changed. Partly to solve this awkward domestic problem, and partly because she felt that the time was ripe for a separation, Mrs. Bateman generously offered Irving the lease of the Lyceum—in the summer of 1878. It was the chance of a lifetime, and he took it with both hands. He spent freely on his preparations, assembling a new company and redecorating the theatre, and by the time the theatre reopened under his management on December 30, 1878—with a revival of *Hamlet*—he had an overdraft of £12,000. Yet from that moment the Lyceum was established as the leading playhouse of London, and under Irving's management it kept its supremacy as the centre of the English theatre for over twenty years. And by his side, throughout that time, was the Ophelia of 1878, that great actress Ellen Terry, who made a great contribution to the success of the enterprise.

Outside, over the portico with its massive pillars (nearly all that remains of Irving's Lyceum) three torches flamed in the London sky every night of the season; inside, the waiting audience sat before the curtain, with 'gas-lit candles in their wine-coloured shades glowing softly on the myrtle-green and cream and purple . . . the green baize in a diffused bluish mist; the music that did not start but insinuated itself upon you till the baize melted and you were in the picture, beholding, yet part of it.' Composing the right kind of picture, and bringing the audience into the picture-frame, was one main factor in Irving's success: he set new standards of illusion, of unity in make-believe, and he brought stage design into line with the dominant trends in Victorian art. He had, moreover, a gift for administra-

tion, reinforced by the power of inspiring loyalty in both staff and actors: the *continuity* of the theatre's organisation, and the awe in which the 'Guv'nor' or the 'Chief' was held by most of his mesmerised subordinates, played a sizeable part in the Lyceum's long record of achievement. Irving's bizarre, single-minded, autocratic personality was stamped on the theatre, behind and in front of the stage; the Lyceum was dedicated to his art—and to his mission in restoring that art to honour in the national life; and this helped to give the theatre its special 'semi-sacred' atmosphere, so that going to a first night there was—so wrote one admirer—'something between a social duty and a religious rite,' and, according to another Lyceumite, 'there was a sacerdotal air about the entire building.' It was, in fact, a veritable temple of dramatic art—of Irving's dramatic art. It had dignity, and beauty, and *permanence*, and from the early years of Irving's regime it was supported by the Victorian elite. Under his guidance, the Lyceum became nearly as fashionable as the opera.

When he took over the management in 1878, Irving had already established the main roles in his repertoire, and repeated them throughout his life: they were the foundation of his supremacy. But during the next twenty years the cares of management, at home and abroad, did not deter him from continually trying out new parts. He revived the role of Sir Edward Mortimer in Colman's celebrated *The Iron Chest*, and Charles Kean's dual role of Fabien and Louis dei Franchi in *The Corsican Brothers*; he created Becket (in Tennyson's verse drama), Corporal Brewster (a Chelsea pensioner in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's one-act *A Story of Waterloo*), and Mephistopheles (in the spectacular charade into which Irving

turned *Faust*); and he added to his Shakespearian laurels the roles of Benedick, Wolsey and Shylock, one of his greatest triumphs. Towards the end of his life Irving found it increasingly difficult to discover good parts, or even satisfactory vehicles. He appeared in a succession of curiously assorted historical disguises, as King Arthur, Don Quixote, Napoleon, Peter the Great, Robespierre and Dante, and the actor was, perhaps, undermined by the manager and producer. Yet, although *The Bells* was the most popular of all his plays until his death, he was never content to rest on such triumphs of the past.

As a producer or director, moreover, he was never content with less than the best—as he conceived it. With other actors he was, perhaps, least successful. He imposed his own conception of the role on each member of his company, coaching them in the details he had already planned before the first rehearsal, insisting on their obedience with a patience and discipline that had no precedent. ‘Very often it only ended,’ said Ellen Terry, ‘in his producing actors who gave colourless, feeble and unintelligent imitations of him’; yet he did not choose to surround himself with colourless and feeble players, as other actor-managers have been known to do. Strong-willed actors, however, sometimes found it difficult to submit to such autocratic methods: after five or six hours of the Chief’s hectoring, said George Alexander, he would go home nearly in tears. Yet these methods helped to establish the *unity*, in conception and execution, that was the hallmark of Irving’s productions. He paid even closer attention to the scenery and the music, bringing into the theatre such leading painters and musicians as Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Sir Laurence Alma Tadema, Sir Edward German, and Sir

Arthur Sullivan. It was such established stage artists as Hawes Craven and William Telbin, however, who produced some of Irving's most successful settings: the church scene of *Much Ado About Nothing* was described by Irving himself as 'Telbin's masterpiece, with its real built-out round pillars thirty feet high, its canopied roof of crimson plush from which hung the golden lamps universally used in Italian cathedrals, its painted canopy overhanging the altar, its great ironwork gates, its altar with cases of flowers and flaming candles rising to a height of eighteen feet, its stained glass windows and statues of saints.' On such effects, Irving spent—even by modern standards—huge sums: *Faust* cost £8,000 and *Henry VIII* £12,000, corresponding to at least £24,000 and £36,000 today! He carried to spectacular extremes the 'archaeological' approach of Macready and Charles Kean, in his concern for historical authenticity. Thus, for *Henry VIII*, a silk was specially woven to match a cardinal's robe of Wolsey's time, and was then sent to Rome to be dyed in the veritable red (only to be returned to England for its final transformation.) For *Faust*, local colour was imported on the grand scale by buying crates full of costumes, furniture and properties in Nuremberg. Yet although the scenery sometimes overwhelmed the play, as in *Olivia*, and although Irving has often been accused of upholstering the drama, so that 'Lyceum Shakespeare' became a synonym for over-elaborate pageantry at the expense of poetry, we have Ellen Terry's testimony that 'Henry would never accept anything that was not right *theatrically* as well as pictorially beautiful.' Again, Gordon Craig says that, 'All the correctness in the world was not worth a fig to Irving unless it *seemed* all right'; and, putting it at a somewhat lower estimate in Sir

Max Beerbohm's words, 'Irving may sometimes have overdone it, but he always overdid it beautifully.' Much of his scenic success was due to his inventive artistry in lighting, using gas and limes (or calcium lights) with daring and imagination. 'Scenes lit by Irving had always the effect of oil-paintings, the boundaries lost in shade, highlights focusing the points of greatest interest.' That point was often Irving's own face, which was followed everywhere by 'a pin light of steel-blue'; but he was, it seems, the first to treat lighting as an essential strand in the director's art. 'The foundation of his method,' according to Miss Muriel St. Clare Byrne, 'was the consistent darkening of the auditorium throughout the performance—advocated by Ingegneri in 1598. Thanks to Irving, playhouse practice, after three centuries, caught up with Renaissance practice.' He secured greater flexibility of control and intensity of contrast; he experimented in the mixing of colour tones; he made a dramatic use of *chiaoscuro* in his romantic lighting—and all this was done with gas, which he insisted on retaining at the Lyceum long after electric light had been installed elsewhere in London.

Irving found his audience not only in the capital but throughout the country, touring the Lyceum productions from town to town for some four months in every year. Whereas Kean and Macready had travelled alone, appearing as 'guest stars'—in modern parlance—with the local stock companies, the development of the railways enabled Irving to tour the provinces with a company of over fifty in a special train. From the profits of these provincial journeys, and of the American tours organised in later years, he financed the rich and imaginative spectacle of his productions. For although his company, at home or on

tour, made money on a bigger scale and for a longer time than any other enterprise in the history of the English drama, Irving's private income was much less than many of his less talented predecessors. With single-minded and far-sighted perfectionism, he put his money back in the theatre, maintaining the standards which helped to give the Lyceum its immense and justified reputation, which helped in turn to win new recognition for the actor, his art and his profession. Progress was swift. Within four years of taking over the Lyceum, Irving was elected to the Athenaeum under Rule 11 (an honour Macready had failed to secure); in the same year (1882) the Prince of Wales asked him to dinner, and later invited himself to one of the famous banquets on the Lyceum stage, which became a feature of late Victorian life in high society. In the following year, on the eve of his first American tour, a public banquet was given in Irving's honour attended by 500 notables, with the Lord Chief Justice in the chair. Already Mr. Gladstone thought of offering him a knighthood. Wisely, Irving let it be known that he felt he could not then accept; but twelve years later, the theatre's moral and social redemption was confirmed when the actor-manager of the Lyceum left Windsor Castle as Sir Henry Irving. In giving him the accolade, and creating the first actor-knight of the English stage, Queen Victoria is reported to have broken her usual silence at such ceremonies and murmured: 'We are very, very pleased.'

This transformation from the outcast to the gentleman was not, of course, entirely due to the magic of Sir Henry Irving. Behind the new respectability of the stage lay the pressures of far-reaching social changes: the accumulation of a rapidly growing population in the towns, the spread of



SIR HENRY IRVING
As Mathias in *The Bells*, 1871



SIR JOHNSTON FORBES-ROBERTSON

As Hamlet, 1897

elementary education, the weakening of the church's influence, the rise in living standards, the development of transport. From the 1870's onwards, playhouses sprang up in London and the provinces; the stage became an outlet for capital and a source of big profits; and the old theatrical system of mid-Victorian times disappeared under the impact of a new entertainment industry, with new values and new vogues. These changes, which helped Irving to win his campaign for social recognition, also helped to destroy him. By the turn of the century, his supremacy was over. The pioneer of the 1870's was attacked as a reactionary in the 1890's. For advocates of Ibsen and the 'drama of ideas', Irving was the symbol of actor-worship, of the 'stagey' theatre they wished to destroy: Shaw was the most ferocious and unfair of Irving's enemies. Once alone in the field, the Lyceum now had to face competition from other actor-managers with theatres of their own—Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Charles Wyndham, George Alexander, John Martin Harvey, and Johnston Forbes-Robertson (some of them Irving's pupils and all later knighted). Their talents were smaller, but so were their budgets. Irving's insistence on lavish staging, his refusal to stint his art or lower his standards in the face of rising costs and dwindling audiences, left the Lyceum without reserves. He had finally, moreover, exhausted his own physical reserves, prodigious as they were, by his arduous tours and his marathon performances of such roles as Hamlet and Macbeth seven and eight times a week for months on end. (He was the first leading actor to play such parts in a long run.) At this time of his life came three crippling blows. First of all, his health collapsed. After the first night of a revived *Richard III* in December, 1896, he fell ill for the first time in his life

and never recovered his former strength. Then in February 1898 the Lyceum's entire store of scenery was destroyed by fire: 260 irreplaceable scenes for 44 plays were wiped out in a night. Early in 1899, Irving made the mistake of handing over the theatre to a syndicate, which undertook to relieve him of financial responsibility: instead of being in command of the Lyceum, he was now the servant of a company, and the theatre slid towards its doom. This came in 1902, when the London County Council insisted on structural alterations which would cost £20,000. The Lyceum closed down, and with it closed a great era. Irving did not long survive. On a farewell tour of the provinces, soon after playing Becket at the Bradford Theatre Royal, he collapsed in his hotel and died—on the night of October 13, 1905. He is buried in Westminster Abbey, next to David Garrick.

'There are only two ways of portraying a character on the stage,' Irving is reported to have said. 'Either you can try to turn yourself into that person—which is impossible—or, and this is the way to act, you can take that person and turn him into yourself. That is how I do it!' In his lifetime, one of the main changes of the vociferous anti-Irving camp was precisely this, that he was 'always Irving'; yet in an actor with so wide a range and so deep an understanding, the distinction between *acteur* and *comédien* seems of little value. 'He was always Irving, yes,' writes H. A. Saintsbury, 'but it was a different facet of Irving that he showed you in each character and they flashed blindingly as the light of his genius played on them.' Or, in the words of Sir Max Beer-bohm's obituary, 'His voice, face, figure, port were not transformable. But so fine was the personality to which

they belonged that none cried shame when this or that part had to submit to be crushed by it. Intransformable he was—multi-radiant though.' Ellen Terry tells us that 'he used to make his entrance in the *skin* of his part'; Violet Vanbrugh says that 'Irving didn't tell you things, he lived them on the stage'; but, as A. B. Walkley wrote, 'the finest thing . . . in any stage-character of Irving's was Irving himself.'

Most of his lives were at the two extremes of human nature—saints and criminals; but sometimes he seemed to draw the two groups together in a common intensity and extravagance, suffused with that strange, unearthly radiance that was part of his stage magic. Black turned into white, so that Shylock, for example, appeared—in Graham Robertson's words—as a 'dignified, heroic, intensely aristocratic martyr.' His comedy had a threat in it, a hint of evil, and his devilry was lit with grim humour. He excelled in what Henry James (one of his sharpest critics) described as 'the chord of the sinister-sardonic, flowered over as vividly as may be with the elegant-grotesque'; there was something Gothic in the villainy of his Richard, Iachimo, and Dubosc. He was a specialist in senility (Corporal Brewster, Richelieu, Louis XI); in priesthood (Becket, Dr. Primrose, Wolsey); and in royalty (Hamlet, King Arthur, Charles I, Philip of Spain)—though his grave dignity and authority sometimes gave an incongruous significance to his characters. As Doctor Primrose, 'one always had a lurking feeling that he should have been Archbishop of Canterbury and not a mere humble Vicar of Wakefield.' He was, moreover, a specialist in guilty consciences and public executions: deeply melancholy in his own nature and passionately interested in crime (in Paris one of his main

pleasures was to visit the morgue), his stage deaths gripped the mind of a generation. 'I do not believe,' wrote Maurice Baring, 'that so much anguish, suspense, terror and remorse have ever been administered to the public in so short a time, in such a powerful and compact dose, as when Irving played Mathias in *The Bells*.' As Mathias, says Ellen Terry, 'he really did almost die—he imagined death with such horrible intensity. His eyes would disappear upwards, his face grow grey, his limbs cold.' The 'mysticism' for which he was so often praised was, in part, the sense he gave to the audience of the imminent extinction of his own dominating personality. When he was murdered as Becket, wrote Maurice Baring, 'I felt that I had witnessed the martyrdom of a great saint.' And whatever Irving did, in whatever role he played, he radiated that mesmeric power, that mysterious magnetism, that electric life force whose unaccountable, irresistible influence helps to make an actor great, and which he exerted more persistently and in larger measure, perhaps, than any other actor in our history. To this hypnosis, as Sir Max wrote at his death, 'rather than to the quality of his genius, which was a thing to be really appreciated only by the few, was due the unparalleled sway he had over the many.'

Yet this secret power did not blaze out upon the world when Irving first set foot upon the stage: it took many years to mature and apply, long years of painful self-improvement in the provinces; the magic needed a wide grounding in technique and experience before it could work its wonders. 'Henry Irving at first had everything against him as an actor,' says Ellen Terry. 'He could not speak, he could not walk, he could not look. He wanted to do things in a part and he could not do them. His amazing power was

imprisoned, and only after long and weary years did he succeed in setting it free'. Even in 1867, only four years before his triumph in *The Bells*, he was—she says—still 'stiff with self-consciousness; his eyes were dull and his face heavy.' He had a dragging leg, an eccentric walk, and a voice without music. His legs were too thin, his shoulders high, his body clumsy and untrained. Yet just as in youth Irving overcame his stutter, so he conquered such handicaps by will-power. He was, as Hazlitt said scornfully of Macready, an 'improving' actor. Where he could not jettison his mannerisms, he made a virtue of them in his art by exaggerating them, and composing them into a highly personal idiom of self-expression. 'My father once told me', Laurence Irving is reported to have said, 'that when he resolved to play the great Shakespearian parts he realized that he had not the physical force to act them in the way they were usually represented, so he translated them into a language of his own.'

For some people, that language remained wilfully and sometimes ludicrously obscure. Henry James wrote in 1880, for example, that: 'Mr. Irving's peculiarities and eccentricities of speech are so strange, so numerous, so personal to himself, his vices of pronunciation, of modulation, of elocution so highly developed, the tricks he plays with the divine mother-tongue so audacious and fantastic, that the spectator who desires to be in sympathy with him finds himself confronted with a bristling hedge of difficulties.' Thus, he said *naw* for *no*, *Gud* for *God*, *god* for *good*, *stod* for *stood*, and *hond* or *hend* for *hand*; he spoke at times with almost painfully slow precision, with a curious nasal resonance, and like Kean and Macready indulged in swift transitions from high to low and back again; and he walked,

in some roles, with a jerky and staccato gait, sometimes almost as if he were dancing, sometimes as if he were striding over a ploughed field, and sometimes stamping his feet in the old barnstorming style. Yet there was nothing accidental about these eccentricities. If he prolonged the vowels and lengthened the syllables it was, as Lena Ashwell said, 'to make up for the lack of depth in his voice'. If he re-scored (or merely ignored) the music of Shakespeare's verse, it was because he could not tune his own 'raven croak' to the true melody. He gave the meaning, not the music, transforming the verse—all too often—into prose, cutting what he could not fit into his design. But that design was elaborately and meticulously planned. Nothing was left to chance: 'nothing real—all massively artificial—yet all flashing with the light and the pulse of nature,' writes Gordon Craig.

Partly influenced by what he described as Irving's 'extraordinary insensibility to literature', Shaw dismissed him as having 'no brains—nothing but character and temperament.' Yet it was not only by magnetic power and personal merit that Irving triumphed, that he is still remembered. He was a highly deliberate, resourceful, imaginative artist, whose successes were the result of careful analysis and preparation, who calculated his effects with masterly timing and self-knowledge, who continued to study and to learn throughout his working life. William Archer—one of Irving's most scathing critics—wrote: 'By intellect he makes us forget his negative failings and forgive his positive faults. By intellect he forces us to respect where we cannot admire. By intellect he dominates the stage.' Irving *thought* his way into greatness. At the beginning of his London career, he seemed outrageously

modern. At the end of it, he seemed dangerously old-fashioned. Looking back today, he appears as the timeless phenomenon of a great actor who was also, in his own sphere, a great artist and a great man.

VI

SIR JOHNSTON FORBES-ROBERTSON

As the court of Denmark filed across the stage, excitement rose in the hushed and expectant theatre. The audience was waiting to greet Prince Hamlet, who had made his entrance in this royal procession since the time of John Philip Kemble. There, at the end of the file, came a tall, familiar figure. His simple black tunic, with a silver chain around his neck, was unrelieved by pasteboard stars or tinsel orders. No wig surmounted one of the best-known faces in the English theatre, lean, clear-cut, fine-featured, though now deeply lined. He walked on without tragic pomp and circumstance, coming to Elsinore as if it were his home; and as he appeared the Lyceum filled with a storm of welcoming applause which even the theatre's overlord, Henry Irving, might have envied. It was the night of September 11, 1897, and Johnston Forbes-Robertson was playing Hamlet—for the first time. After twenty-three years on the stage, at the age of forty-four, he had begun to take the measure of the great roles in the English repertoire. At long last he was entering his inheritance.

Even more impressive than the applause, said a first-nighter, was 'the unbroken silence with which the whole house seemed to hang upon Hamlet's voice. Once or twice a cheer from the gallery broke upon the stillness, but it was promptly suppressed by a prolonged "sh" from all sides.' Here was a difference indeed from the rowdy, brawling

crowds who watched Kean, Kemble and Macready; and the silence was due not only to the transformation in theatre manners but also to a change in acting style. Forbes-Robertson was not playing for 'points', like his great predecessors. There were no 'audacious attempts at new readings', no 'startling theatrical surprises, whether of scenery or characterisation.' (The scenery was lent by Irving.) What seemed so extraordinary, indeed, was the very simplicity and humanity of this Prince of Denmark. After the romantic chiaroscuro of Irving's performance, Forbes-Robertson supplied a classical lucidity, consistency and harmony, with 'infinite and ever-changing phases and gradations of light and shade. . . .' Instead of tailoring the text to his own intensities, he seemed to give *all* the words their proper value, as if he were thinking aloud, and as a result *all* the character came to life. Here was not merely an 'introspective philosopher' alternating with an 'impulsive avenger', but a Hamlet who matched 'in every particular' Ophelia's description:

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword:
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form.

Here, said the critics, was Hamlet 'in his entirety,' 'thoroughly natural', 'the most humanly natural of any impersonation known to the contemporary English stage,' 'the most human, the most natural, and in temperament the most lovable.' Half-way through the evening a veteran critic was heard to exclaim: 'My dear sir, the man was born to play Hamlet!'

Instead of the conventionally gloomy and hysterical Dane, Forbes-Robertson presented a humorous, sweet-

natured, gentlemanly prince, whose intellect—as Shaw put it—was ‘the organ of his passion.’ Other Hamlets, Shaw complained, treated the players, the gravedigger, Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ‘as if they were mutes at his own funeral. But go and watch Mr. Forbes-Robertson’s Hamlet seizing delightedly on every opportunity for a bit of philosophic discussion or artistic recreation to escape from the “cussed spite” of revenge and love and other common troubles; see how he brightens up when the players come; how he tries to talk philosophy with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the moment they come into the room; how he stops on his country walk with Horatio to lean over the churchyard wall and draw out the gravedigger . . .; how even his fits of excitement find expression in declaiming scraps of poetry; how the shock of Ophelia’s death relieves itself in the fiercest intellectual contempt for Laertes’s ranting, whilst an hour afterwards, when Laertes stabs him, he bears no malice for that at all, but embraces him gallantly and comradely; and how he dies as we forgive everything to Charles II for dying, and makes “the rest is silence” a touchingly humorous apology for not being able to finish his business. See all that; and you have seen a true classical Hamlet.’ Earlier, Shaw had explained that: ‘What I mean by classical is that he can present a dramatic hero as a man whose passions are those which have produced the philosophy, the poetry, the art and the statecraft of the world, and not merely those which have produced its weddings, coroner’s inquests, and executions.’

All Hamlets hitherto had brought down the curtain on ‘The rest is silence,’ but Forbes-Robertson restored most of the original ending. Death-white, Hamlet staggered to the throne of Denmark, his face—as it seemed to one first-

nighter—'rapt and inspired with a vision of the higher mystery.' Groping with feeble fingers in the air, 'gazing on some unseen seraphic vision,' he whispered 'The rest is silence'—and died, 'with an expiring flash, like a breeze passing unnoticed through the sultry air.' The court fell on their knees around the throne, Horatio placed the crown on Hamlet's knees between his hands, and then Fortinbras made his entrance—for the first time in nearly three hundred years. Horatio's speeches were cut down to a few lines, but when Fortinbras cried: 'Go, bid the soldiers shoot,' four of his soldiers lifted Hamlet on to their shields, and carried him slowly off the stage, surrounded by torch-bearers. Not everyone approved this restoration of the play's ending: to William Archer it seemed, astonishingly, 'of no literary value', and to J. T. Grein it was 'an anticlimax justified neither by a pretended respect for Shakespeare (for the text is none too gently treated in this performance) nor by the theatrical pageantry of which it was the occasion.' Yet to Shaw, and to posterity, it was one of Forbes-Robertson's most distinctive achievements. 'How many generations of Hamlets, all thirsting to outshine their competitors in effect and originality,' wrote Shaw, 'have regarded Fortinbras, and the clue he gives to this kingly death for Hamlet, as a wildly unrepresentable blunder of the poor foolish old Swan, than whom they all knew so much better! How sweetly they have died in that faith to slow music, like Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*! And now how completely Mr. Forbes-Robertson has bowled them all out by being clever enough to be simple.'

With more justification, some critics complained about Forbes-Robertson's relative equability and restraint. Was he not, they asked, overdoing the good manners? Was

Hamlet quite so much of an English gentleman? Other Hamlets had triumphed in the 'mad' scenes. Forbes-Robertson's Prince was 'only mad when he would appear so, and not unmistakably mad even then.' And although, as Archer wrote contemptuously, 'Our forefathers took a delight in the contemplation of insanity which we no longer feel, and it is evident that their actors revelled in exhibitions of mopping, mowing, and gibbering, such as would merely inspire us with disgust,' yet he could see no reason for the 'exceeding tameness' of Forbes-Robertson's acting after the Ghost's departure in the first act and in the nunnery scene with Ophelia. He spoke to the Ghost 'in the cellarage' with 'respectful melancholy'; he addressed Ophelia with almost 'paternal' tenderness; he reproached his mother with gentle, plaintive sorrow. He omitted, said Archer, 'a good many of the wild and whirling words, and he puts no force or gusto into those he utters. . . . Artistic self-restraint is a very good thing,' he noted, 'but in this case it verges on timidity.' Some of this 'timidity' vanished after the first night, but the quality of which critics complained was all of a piece with the gentlemanly naturalism of this Hamlet's character—with his friendly talk to the players, his kindly teasing of Polonius, his gay banter with the gravedigger, which seemed to some playgoers sadly deficient in the true tragic solemnity.

Another complaint, from a generation brought up on Irving's Hamlet, was that Forbes-Robertson spoke much too quickly. Where were the pauses, the stresses, of the veteran Shakespearian actor? Yet the fact was that the old method was, in this respect, the wrong method. Now, for the first time in many years, the text was given its full musical value by a star actor; because—for the first time

since Betterton, perhaps—here was a star actor who not only understood the verse but had the voice for it. Forbes-Robertson's voice has probably never been equalled on the English stage. Deep, melodious and vibrant, it was his supreme asset. He was not obliged to re-score the verse and invent new readings, as Archer pointed out, 'in order to mask and excuse the breathing-space required by deficient physical power, and lack of skill in the management of the voice. He speaks his effects in Shakespeare's words, and not in his pauses. . . .' Far from being too rapid, said Archer, 'the bane of almost all recent Shakespearian acting has been its torturing slowness. . . .' Shaw also praised Forbes-Robertson's handling of the verse. 'He does not utter half a line; then stop to act; then go on with another half line; and then stop to act again, with the clock running away with Shakespear's chances all the time. He plays as Shakespear should be played, on the line¹ and to the line, with the utterance and acting simultaneous, inseparable and in fact identical.' Hesketh Pearson records that 'He and Ellen Terry were the only two players in my experience who delivered the language of Shakespeare as if it were their natural idiom and whose beauty of diction matched the beauty of the words.'

Whatever the reservations of the minority, on that first September evening in 1897 at the old Lyceum, there was no doubt about the triumph of Forbes-Robertson. On the next morning, he found Irving sitting at a table with the papers in front of him. Banging them with his hand, Forbes-Robertson recalled, Irving said to him: "'Well, you've done it.'" I was very much played out, and had sunk into a chair on the other side of the table, but his cheering words, uttered while that wonderful smile played over his face, put

new life into me. "Yes," he repeated, "you've done it, and now you must go and play Hamlet all over the world." For the next nineteen years, until his retirement at the age of sixty-three, 'Forbie' followed Sir Henry's advice, and never lost command of his audience. 'Over and over again both in England and America', he wrote in his autobiography, *A Player Under Three Reigns*, 'when the production of a new play had spelt failure, a revival of *Hamlet* had always set me on my feet again.' He was, indeed, at once recognised as 'the Hamlet of a generation of Hamlets,' and it is as the Prince of Denmark that he won his place among the great English actors.

It seems all the stranger that Forbes-Robertson delayed so long in attempting the role, and then, according to his own account, it was only under pressure from Irving. When planning a season at the Lyceum in 1897 (while Irving was on tour), he was at a loss for a play! With the whole range of the classic repertoire before him, after only two years of management, Forbes-Robertson did not know what to put on the stage. Sir Henry solved the problem, by telling him: 'Play *Hamlet*,' and offering to lend him the scenery and properties. The younger man, who regarded the role as Irving's property, was much impressed by this generosity; yet even then he was undecided. To Ellen Terry, he said: 'Everybody plays *Hamlet*; it has been played to death; people are sick of *Hamlet*.' Crushinglly, Miss Terry asked him if he wanted violinists to stop playing some of Beethoven's best works because other violinists had also played them in the past. And so Forbes-Robertson was persuaded into greatness. It is a sidelong approach to the summit, compared with the assault made by Irving and others upon the peaks of their art.

Johnston Forbes-Robertson was born in London on January 16, 1853, the eldest child of a Scottish art-critic and journalist. In notable contrast with many of his great predecessors, he enjoyed a peaceful, happy and comfortable childhood, in a home visited by many leading artists. Educated at Charterhouse, he spent most of his summer holidays in France. Under the guidance of his father (part-author of a biography of Samuel Phelps), he knew all the plays of Shakespeare before he was thirteen, learning by heart 'very many of the great passages.' At home, in the Christmas holidays, he attempted *Macbeth* (at 14), *Hamlet* (at 15) and *Othello* (at 16) with the support of his sister and brothers, before audiences which included such friends of his father as Alma Tadema, Ford Madox Brown and Swinburne. He also began to train his voice, on a system recommended by another family acquaintance, the historian Dr. Brewer. Forbes-Robertson had been 'reading a scene or two from *King Lear* to some friends in my mother's drawing-room', when the historian took him aside. 'He led me to the piano, and striking a very low note, said, "Now speak a line of six or seven words on that note, *don't sing* them, speak them. For instance, let's try the words, 'Angels and ministers of grace, defend us'." This I did, and then he took me from note to note as high as it was possible for me to speak on the note he struck. Said he, "You must practise to extend your speaking register just as a singer does his notes, that you may get flexibility and variety of tone and thereby free your voice from monotony of delivery." ' The boy followed Dr. Brewer's advice, and continued the exercise 'for many years'; it was his only training for the stage.

Amateur theatricals, however, were only one of young Forbes-Robertson's hobbies. He was also a keen painter,

and the climate of his home encouraged his experiments in self-expression. A frequent visitor to the house was Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for whom he modelled Eros in the picture of 'Dante's Dream.' Impressed by some of the boy's oils, Rossetti urged Mr. Forbes-Robertson to let Johnston take up painting, and as soon as he was old enough he was sent to Heatherley's, a famous art-school, to 'draw from the antique.' Within a year he was admitted to the Royal Academy, where he remained until he was nearly twenty-one. But although his father had put no obstacles in his way, and had indeed given all the help and encouragement he could wish for, Mr. Forbes-Robertson was not a rich man. 'I was the eldest of a large family, and it was time for me to get out of the nest and make my own living.' He had to find a job, and he found it—by accident—on the stage. W. G. Wills, the dramatist, was dissatisfied with the 'juvenile lead' in his new play, *Mary Queen of Scots*, at the Princess's, and he asked Forbes-Robertson to take over the part. There is some mystery about how this happened. Wills's biographer says that the dramatist saw the young art student in the street, realised that he was 'cast by nature' for the role of Chastelard, the poet-lover, and asked him 'on the spot.' Others report that Mr. Forbes-Robertson, hearing of Wills's predicament, recommended Johnston—'Why don't you try my eldest?' The actor himself says that it was because Wills had seen him perform as a boy in drawing-room Shakespeare. But whatever the explanation, Forbes-Robertson made his professional debut on March 12, 1874, at the Princess's Theatre in Oxford Street—billed on the programme as 'Forbes Robinson.' It was in this way, at two days' notice, that he entered the theatre, although, he assured the readers of his autobiography, 'it

was no wish of mine to become an actor.' *Mary Queen of Scots* soon disappeared from the stage, but Forbes-Robertson remained on it for forty years. From then onwards he was never out of work for long, and within two years he had emerged as one of the white hopes of the younger generation of English players.

Untrained and inexperienced as he was, lacking in any true sense of vocation, Forbes-Robertson began his new career with two great advantages, his musical voice and his beauty. Ellen Terry, with whom he appeared on tour that year in his second part, recalled that he was 'wonderful—a dreamy, poetic-looking creature.' In the time of Kemble and Kean, such assets would not have been sufficient to win, at first go, a leading role for so green a novice; but the late Victorian theatre already offered rich opportunities to the new generation of gentlemanly amateurs, of whom Forbes-Robertson may be taken as a leader. With the expansion of the industry in London and the provinces, many managers were in search of handsome, personable young men; and the contemporary repertoire, under the long run system, offered far less exacting avenues to success than the old 'patent' programmes. The general reduction in the size of playhouses (compared with the white elephants—so far as the 'straight' drama was concerned—of Covent Garden and Drury Lane); the replacement of gas by electricity; the abolition of the pit and the introduction of the stalls (at twice the price); and, above all, the recruitment of a new middle class audience—all these changes helped to shape English acting, as we know it, in the last twenty years of the century. Gentlemen were in demand, and already in 1880 Henry James noted the advent of young men from the middle classes who entered the theatre 'after

being educated for something very different.' He observed that 'the art of acting as little as possible has . . . taken the place of the art of acting as much.' Bluster and rant were succeeded by self-restraint and good manners: gentility, all too often, became a substitute for skill, 'personality' could triumph without technique, and *acting* gave way to *behaviour*.

Forbes-Robertson has sometimes been described as the last of the old school, in the Kemble-Macready-Irving tradition; he might with equal justice be labelled as the first of the new school; yet, as he himself said, 'There is the good old school, and the bad old school, and the former is the best school for any time.' Although he became an actor so relatively late in life, he had the advantage in that inaugural year of working with Samuel Phelps, the best of the good old school. It happened at Manchester, where Forbes-Robertson was engaged for a few months in Charles Calvert's stock company (with which Irving had spent two profitable years). In the traditional way—a way soon to be destroyed—Phelps came to Manchester to play Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and to double the King and Shallow in *Henry IV Part II*. Forbes-Robertson took the part of Prince Hal. 'During the first rehearsal of the impressive scene between the King and the Prince, Phelps suddenly grunted out, "Young man, you know nothing about this part; come to my dressing-room tonight at seven o'clock." I knocked at his door in fear and trembling that night. . . . He went through my part with me, and my eyes were opened to many things, the main one being that though I had worked much at the part, I knew precious little about it. . . . He bade me to his lodging the next day for further study, and this was the beginning of an interest

he took in all my doings almost to the day of his death, and from that time on he seldom played an engagement without me.' In December, when Phelps came to the Gaiety in London, Forbes-Robertson came with him to play Fenton in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; and the old actor gave the handsome young novice a thorough grounding in the classic repertoire and its traditions, casting him in such parts as Joseph Surface, Cromwell, Orsino and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. In 1878, a few months before Phelps died, Forbes-Robertson painted him as Wolsey: it was in that role that Phelps made his last appearance, collapsing in the arms of Forbes-Robertson's brother Norman, in whose stage career he also took a keen personal interest. 'To be taken up so early in my career by one of the best of the old school,' as Forbes-Robertson says, 'was my supreme good fortune. He had been Macready's favourite actor, Macready had played with Mrs. Siddons, and she had played with Garrick, so that I may boast of a good histrionic pedigree, and I confess to pride at being a link with the great past in my calling. . . . Samuel Phelps's dignity of mind, his high ideals, his pride in his calling, his contempt for wire-pullers, left a lasting impression which remained with me through all my stage career. The attainments of that career, such as they have been, are due to his influence and teaching.' The portrait of Phelps as Wolsey now hangs in the Garrick Club.

During the next twenty years, however, although Forbes-Robertson acted scores of parts in many theatres on both sides of the Atlantic, he had few opportunities to show that he could be considered as the heir of Phelps or as 'a link with the great past.' The plays in which he appeared were, for the most part, ephemeral romantic melodramas and

comedies; and in none of them did he seize the public's imagination and command its allegiance as a great actor, although he enjoyed a steady success in the middle range. He showed, moreover, no desire to be his own master and choose his own roles, although the English stage now offered wider freedoms to the player who wanted to set up in business for himself. Actors and actresses leased London playhouses for long reigns with semi-permanent companies, which toured the provinces during the summer. It was with Buckstone's company at the Haymarket, in 1876, that Forbes-Robertson first came into the public eye (he appeared as a young sailor in W. S. Gilbert's Civil War drama, *Dan'l Druce, Blacksmith*). Later, after two seasons at the Olympic, he joined the Bancrofts, who were the pioneers of so many changes on both sides of the footlights. At the Prince of Wales Theatre, off the Tottenham Court Road, they had introduced the domestic comedies of Tom Robertson, revolutionary in their 'naturalism'; they had improved the comfort and appearance of the auditorium; they used real doors and windows and other 'practical' scenery; they increased both the pay and the prestige of actors; and they attracted a new section of society to the theatre, by making it 'respectable' once more. Forbes-Robertson appeared in their last production in the old Prince of Wales (as a comic Cockney sergeant in Robertson's *Ours*), and in their first venture at the Haymarket in 1880 (as Lord Glossmore in a revival of Lytton's *Money*). He was thus an eye-witness of the last of those riots which had marked the history of the English theatre.

When Forbes-Robertson played at the Haymarket under Buckstone, 'it had only two rows of meagre stalls, into which ladies did not go. The dress circle was the fashionable

part of the house in those days.' But Bancroft remodelled the theatre, turned the pit into stalls, and relegated the pittites to the gallery—a transformation which symbolised the social and economic changes in the English theatre as a whole. On the first night—January 31, 1880—the gallery showed its disapproval by kicking up a storm of protest as soon as the curtain rose and Forbes-Robertson came on the stage. It was impossible to begin the play, and the barrackers would not listen to Bancroft's explanations. 'Give us back our pit!', they shouted in chorus. Yet when Bancroft said, 'Well, if you won't listen to me, will you listen to the play?' they all answered, 'Yes,' and—according to Forbes-Robertson—'the rest of the play was listened to with great attention.' That was the sum of the 'riot', and although controversy about 'the pit question' continued for some weeks, there were no more violent demonstrations at the theatre. Such docility, in contrast with the ferocity of the audiences who howled down Kemble and Kean and Irving, was a sign of the times.

Another sign of the times was the fact that, between his work with Phelps and his Hamlet, Forbes-Robertson appeared in only five Shakespearian roles. Two of these, Romeo and Orlando, came within his range as a *jeune premier*. He played Romeo to the Juliets of both Helena Modjeska, the famous Polish actress, and Mary Anderson, the American star. With Modjeska he also appeared as Maurice de Saxe in *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, Leicester in *Mary Stuart*, and Armand Duval in *La Dame aux Camellias* (suitably Englished); and with Mary Anderson he toured the U.S.A., playing Orlando, Claude Melnotte, and other parts. Later he played Leontes to her Hermione-Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, for which he designed all the dresses. He worked with

the Bancrofts until their retirement in 1885, and then joined John Hare's company at the Garrick, where he remained for six years. Two of his most notable successes here were as villains—Duncan Renishaw in Pinero's *The Profligate*, and Scarpia in Sardou's *La Tosca*. But his best work of all, it seems, was done for Irving at the Lyceum, where he worked in three productions: as Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1882), Buckingham in *Henry VIII* (1892) and Lancelot in *King Arthur* (1895). It was here that, once again, he made contact with the 'old school.'

Working with him in 1882, Ellen Terry noted a 'marvellous' improvement in the past eight years. 'I had once said to him that he had far better stick to his painting and become an artist instead of an actor. His Claudio made me "take it back." It was beautiful . . . Forbes-Robertson put a touch of Leontes into it, a part which some years later he was to play magnificently. . . .' Yet even now, one critic complained, Forbes-Robertson was 'too apt to throw his head back, and gesticulate too freely, and to wave arms and legs in an eccentric manner,' with what was described as 'an irrepressible gaucherie.' His Buckingham, however, was a triumph: because of the noble eloquence, pathos and dignity of the farewell speech, this performance has been classed with his Hamlet by many of Forbes-Robertson's admirers: 'like a medieval saint whose beautiful face above his black death robe recalled an exquisite early Italian carving in ivory, whose grand voice, ringing out between the strokes of the passing bell, drew all hearts towards him.' As Lancelot his main effect was pictorial. 'He has a beautiful costume,' noted Shaw drily, 'mostly of plate-armour of Burne-Jonesian design; and he wears it beautifully, like a fifteenth century St. George. . . . He was more than

applauded on his entrance; he was positively adored.' Archer confirmed that 'his figure is absolutely beautiful', but complained that he suggested an 'affable archangel' from the paintings of Gozzoli or Carpaccio rather than a knight of the Round Table; 'or if indeed a knight, then the stainless Galahad rather than the superbly human Lancelot of the Lake.' Graham Robertson also observed that he 'played and looked Galahad to perfection.' During the run of *King Arthur* Forbes-Robertson left the Lyceum to play in Pinero's *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*, in the somewhat less saintly character of Lucas Cleeve; but he wrote to Irving that 'my three engagements at the Lyceum have been the bright sunny spots in my stage life. I do not think you can have any idea what a pleasure it has been to me to act with you, to take up the tone and movement of the scene with you, to play into your hands as best I might. All this has been a labour of love.'

When Forbes-Robertson at last entered management, some months later, it was at the Lyceum, and he resolved to do his best to uphold the Irving tradition. Yet, he writes in his autobiography, 'I would gladly have remained an actor pure and simple. . . . I had acted with all the leading people of that time, and, though at periods being very hard worked, I had comparatively no anxieties. The very speculative and gambling nature of theatrical management was distasteful to me, and I knew that my own personal efforts as an actor would be considerably handicapped by all the extra labour and anxiety which management entails.' But if he was to 'maintain his place,' he realised that he would have to shoulder the burden. He shared it, frequently, with Mrs. Patrick Campbell, often subordinating himself as an actor, and with his wife Gertrude Elliott,

whom he married in 1900. Even when in control of his own destiny, Forbes-Robertson seemed to lack the appetite for supreme power which marks most great actors. Unlike Irving and the Bancrofts, or such contemporaries as George Alexander and Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Forbes-Robertson never had a theatre of his own and a consistent policy, nor did he maintain a large repertoire. As a manager, he had little influence on the theatre of his time. He staged *The School for Scandal*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. He presented Maeterlinck's *Pelleas and Melisande* and Sudermann's *Magda*. He commissioned John Davidson's *For the Crown* (adapted from François Coppée) and Henry James's *The High Bid* (which came to grief in the provinces). He introduced *Caesar and Cleopatra*, written expressly for him by Shaw. But Forbes-Robertson's biggest successes were of more perishable stuff. In *Mice and Men*, he appeared as Mark Embury, an eighteenth century pedagogue who adopts a child in order to turn her into a model wife, but leaves love out of his scientific curriculum. In *The Light That Failed*, adapted from Kipling's novel, he took the role of Dick Helder, a disillusioned war correspondent and painter who loses his sight and his sweetheart (who is restored at the last curtain). And in Jerome K. Jerome's *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*—first staged at the St. James's in 1908—he scored the triumph of his career as a mysterious Christ-like stranger who visits a Bloomsbury lodging-house and remoulds the lives of the tenants. It was in this shoddy piece—'vilely stupid . . . twaddle and vulgarity', Max Beerbohm called it—that Forbes-Robertson established his popular ascendancy in the Edwardian theatre, and it dominated the last years of his acting life. Five years later, he made his farewell to the London stage

at Drury Lane, in a three-month season which included *Hamlet*, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *The Light that Failed*, *Mice and Men*, and *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*, and was knighted in the last week. His final appearance was as Hamlet, on June 3, 1913. Then he set out on a prolonged farewell tour of the U.S.A. It was not until April, 1916 that Forbes-Robertson bade his last good-bye to the stage. He appeared as Hamlet at Harvard, where the Sheldon Lecture Theatre had been turned for the occasion into a reconstructed version of Shakespeare's own playhouse. After the play was over, after all the presentations and speeches had been made, the old actor went down to his dressing-room with a light heart. He took off his Hamlet costume for the last time 'with no sort of regret, but rather with a great sense of relief.' For, looking back on his life, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson decided that he was never really fitted to be an actor. 'Never at any time have I gone on the stage without longing for the moment when the curtain would come down on the last act. Rarely, very rarely have I enjoyed myself in acting. This cannot be the proper mental attitude for an actor, and I am persuaded . . . that I was not temperamentally suited to my calling.' It seems, in one sense, an appropriate abdication by the Hamlet of his generation. For over twenty years Forbes-Robertson remained in retirement, publishing his autobiography (a disappointing book) in 1923. He died peacefully on November 6, 1937, at the age of 84.

Was Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson really a great actor? There is plenty of evidence against the claim. He lacked the quicksilver versatility of Garrick, the lightning-flash

intensity of Kean, the mesmeric power of Irving. Compared with Kemble and Macready, he lacked stamina, and self-confidence, and leadership. He entered his calling without enthusiasm, maintained it without ambition, and left it without regret—if we are to believe his own testimony. Unlike even Charles Kean and Samuel Phelps, he left small impression upon the theatre of his time. His range, moreover, was small—smaller than Kemble's or Kean's. Although he occasionally appeared in 'character' comedy and achieved some success as a stage cad or even a villain, Forbes-Robertson's fame was built upon his prowess as a romantic hero and established by his authority as a Christian gentleman. A paragon of virtue and a prince of chivalry, he seemed—in his best roles—to radiate a special and authentic kind of suffering *goodness* inseparable from his personal beauty. Sometimes he was an Arthurian knight (Archer called his Lancelot a 'stained glass hero'), or a Balkan martyr (as Constantin Brancimir of *For the Crown* he seemed 'a young Charlemagne' who turned into 'a mixture of Ignatius Loyola and Savonarola.') More frequently, in his later years, he was in holy orders—as Pastor Heffterdingk in *Magda* (resisting temptation), as Michael Feversham in *Michael and his Lost Angel* (yielding to temptation), as Sotheby in *Mrs. Grundy* and Jacques Bernez in *The Sacrament of Judas*. And, with the consummation of *The Third Floor Back*, he appeared to be a visitor from the other world—if not Christ Himself. In the words of the obituary in *The Times*, the role of the Stranger 'brought out the sweetness and goodness that formed the basis of Forbes-Robertson's character,' the character which infused his Hamlet with such personal grace, and charity, and the quality so often described as 'spirituality.'

When Forbes-Robertson is remembered today, it is most frequently perhaps as a tall, lean, and kindly man whose noble features are lit up by an other-worldly smile. Such was the pervasive sweetness of his personality, and the weakness of his craft, that it haloed other characters—quite incongruously—with the same nobility. Othello was refined into Christian virtue: 'I have seen no actor,' said Gordon Crosse in *Shakespearian Playgoing, 1900 to 1952*, 'who could make the true nobility of Othello's soul shine out so convincingly.' As Macbeth, said J. T. Grein, he suggested 'a philosopher, a leader of men, a creature of mythical powers.' After taking the crown this Macbeth was distinguished by 'mournful, ironical self-pity'; with Banquo's assassins, he was 'as slyly humorous and as unctuously courteous as Hamlet in his attitude towards Polonius'; he was 'demure' in battle; and, until he revised his make-up, he reminded people forcibly—said Grein—of a well-known picture of Jesus.

Yet both the Othello and the Macbeth were highly praised by such critics as Max Beerbohm for being so uncommonly 'human' and 'natural', the very epithets which marked off his Hamlet from all the others. To explain that impression in such great roles it is not enough to give the credit to Forbes-Robertson's 'personality', to say that he was being 'natural' to himself: he was being true to Shakespeare—and in a way that was unprecedented on the stage since Betterton. Not only did he pay a greater respect to the Shakespearian text than any of his predecessors in this book; not only did he shake off a few more of the encumbering traditions of stagey speech and behaviour; but he brought to the speaking of the verse and prose a keen intelligence, an artist's sensibility, and a

splendid voice. Although his powers of characterisation were limited, and his range of facial and physical expression was small, he knew—at his best—how to let the *words* do their work, how to *speak* a role: not a line here or there in splendid isolation, not one soliloquy or five ‘bursts’, but the entirety, both verse and prose. His lack of egotism, elsewhere a disadvantage, was here a rare asset: he put Shakespeare before Forbes-Robertson. Even if Forbes-Robertson’s personality refused obstinately to turn into a jealous Moor, a murdering Scot or a vengeful Jew, his voice allowed you to hear the text in action. ‘Forbie couldn’t make faces,’ as one old actor put it, ‘but he could make wonderful music.’ His voice reminded some people of Phelps (whom, when reopening Sadler’s Wells Theatre in January 1931, he described as ‘my master’). Yet although he was indebted to Phelps for his mastery of control, phrasing and modulation, he did not imitate the pomps and pauses of the Macready school. The relative swiftness of his delivery linked the old tradition with the melodic naturalism of his modern heir, Sir John Gielgud. Forbes-Robertson’s voice has been variously compared with an organ and a cello. Shaw described it ‘a clarionet in A, played only in the chalumeau register’; but he added that ‘the chalumeau, sympathetically sounded, has a richly melancholy and noble effect’, and declared on another occasion that Forbes-Robertson was ‘the only actor I know who can find out the feeling of a speech from its cadence. His art meets the dramatist’s art directly. . . .’

· For in Forbes-Robertson’s ‘naturalness’ and ‘humanity’ there was none of the everyday casualness and prosiness that is today so often confounded with truth in acting. It was carefully practised, slowly perfected, premeditated.

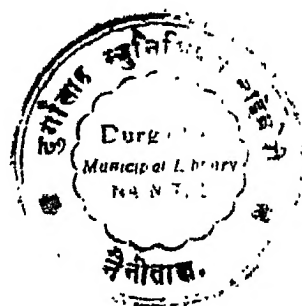
In his movement, as in his speech, he was a classic actor. 'That you will see Forbes-Robertson walk down and, especially across the stage is a sufficient reason for going to a theatre,' wrote C. E. Montague. 'His use of the arms in rhetoric has the severe beauty that some of the great orators must have had. . . . The beauty of each gesture and tone is almost abstract in its purity; the raised arm, did it mean nothing, is still a lovely line; the cadences have the independent, absolute values of music; they would please though you did not know English. His is the acting,' Montague continued in this great tribute, 'that mainly relies for its charm on measure, a comely order, "discretion", "smoothness", "temperance", the "modesty" of nature, all the set of qualities that Hamlet praised to the players. . . . He never tries, as naturalistic actors do, by some sudden turn of queer, incontestable veracity, to shake you into a troubling and importunate consciousness of the presence of life. It is not in his art to trouble; rather to tranquillize; it soothes you like some Augustan architecture, with its just proportions, the ranged masses of its declamation, its expression of dependence on sound reason, lucidity, intellectual balance. Romantic acting, like other romantic art, is adventure, almost gambling; it comes off and it seems to have found new worlds, or lit on the door of magic, or it fails and flops into grotesqueness. Classical acting like Forbes-Robertson's runs lesser risks; it may not take your breath away, or send a momentary wave of coldness across your face, or elicit whatever your special bodily signal may be of your mind's amazed and sudden surrender to some stroke of passionate genius. But there is one glory of the sun and another glory of the moon.' To that one may add the tribute of Professor Odell: 'To have

been the Hamlet of one's time is a great glory; and such glory belongs to Forbes-Robertson.'

That is one answer to the question: was Forbes-Robertson really a great actor? It is no part of the author's job in this book to assess the comparative stature of these six players: was Kean greater than Garrick, or Irving greater than Macready? Certainly, Forbes-Robertson did less than any of the others in this gallery, but he was unequalled in what he *could* do. Although he worked in a theatre where—for a variety of reasons—it became much more difficult to acquire the experience and training needed for greatness in acting, he achieved his own perfection, unique in his time, of self-made classicism. Whatever Forbes-Robertson might say, in his humility, about his 'temperamental' unsuitability for the stage; however he might avoid the burdens of leadership and management; however he might deplore the rareness of that 'impersonal exaltation' which he thought he should have attained much more frequently; yet he was a patient, dedicated, self-improving actor who made his way to the heights and carried with him the conscience and the ideals of an artist. 'Now that you have left the stage,' Shaw wrote to him in 1925, after the publication of his autobiography, 'there is only the printed word to show . . . that to reach the highest rank it is not necessary to be an egotist or a monster. . . .'

Whether you talk about 'old' or 'new' schools of acting, there is—as the great Italian tragedian Salvini said—only one school: 'the school of truth.' In England, the school of truth is the school of Shakespeare: that, as I have written elsewhere, is the supreme test of greatness on our stage. 'If it possible to define the great actor, it is only as the actor who can reach the summits of his art—and

these, in England, are the Himalayan heroes of Shakespeare. . . . It may take twenty years to reach the top, and the ascent may be made by twenty different routes, but the goal is always the same: to *be* the Moor of Venice or the Prince of Denmark in a state of grace where part and performance are indivisible, where illusion and reality are marvellously balanced in the harmony of great art, where *being* and *seeming* are simultaneously true, when the actor transcends the stage and the man becomes humanity.' In his own time, Forbes-Robertson reached that goal with Hamlet.



POSTSCRIPT

MANY books have gone to the making of this brief survey. These biographies have been indispensable: Margaret Barton's *Garrick* (1948), Herschel Baker's *John Philip Kemble* (1942), H. N. Hillebrand's *Edmund Kean* (1933), J. C. Trewin's *Mr. Macready* (1955), Laurence Irving's *Henry Irving* (1951), and Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson's autobiography *A Player Under Three Reigns* (1925). For details and analysis of acting I am indebted to A. C. Sprague's *Shakespearian Players and Performances* (1954); *Lichtenberg's Visits to England* (1938), translated by M. L. Mare and W. H. Quarrell; William Hazlitt's *A View of the London Stage* and his essays on the drama in 'The London Magazine'; *Dramatic Essays by Leigh Hunt* (1894), edited by William Archer and R. W. Lowe; *Leigh Hunt's Dramatic Criticism, 1808-1831* (1950), edited by L. W. and C. W. Houtchens; William Robson's *The Old Playgoer* (1854); *The Diaries of William Charles Macready* (1912), edited by W. Toynbee; G. H. Lewes's *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (1875); *Dramatic Essays by John Forster and George Henry Lewes* (1896), edited by William Archer and R. W. Lowe; Bernard Shaw's *Our Theatres in the Nineties* (1932); Gordon Craig's *Henry Irving* (1930); *We Saw Him Act: a Symposium on the Art of Sir Henry Irving* (1939), edited by H. A. Saintsbury and Cecil Palmer; W. Graham Robertson's *Time Was* (1931); Ellen Terry's *The Story of My Life* (1908); C. E. Montague's *Dramatic Values* (1910); and Sir Max Beerbohm's *Around Theatres* (1924). Among other useful books I have drawn upon: *Letters of an Unsuccessful Actor* (1923); Arthur Murphy's *Life of David Garrick* (1801); James Boaden's *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble* (1825); Giles Playfair's *Kean* (1950 edn.); William Archer's *William Charles Macready* (1890); *Macready's Reminiscences, and Selections from his Diaries and Letters* (1876 edn.), edited by Sir Frederick Pollock; Westland Marston's *Our Recent Actors* (1890); W. G. Pollock's *Impressions of Henry Irving* (1908); Ernest Bradlee Watson's *Sheridan to Robertson* (1926); and the resources of the Enthoven Collection. For permission to quote from copyright material my thanks are due to: Messrs. Chatto & Windus, publishers of *Dramatic Values*; Messrs. Hurst & Blackett, publishers of *We Saw Him Act: a Symposium on the Art of Henry Irving*.

